

Sustainable ministry in an age of transition

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Sustainability has been a theme running through much recent material related to ministry in developing nations, and even those in our own region of Oceania. This has been part of the focus of those concerned with financial and personnel support, and it has been included in the literature from the Leadership Team, Ministry Directorate, and the Edmund Rice Foundation. But what does it really mean for us?

At this time, the Province is facing the need to look to how it can maintain the ministries and their associated projects which have been begun in the developing nations. This presumes that these projects need to keep going. Some projects are specifically designed to be short-term; those are not really my concern here. If projects that are meant to have a continuing life and a long-term impact have been begun with sound development principles and good research, which included the local people and their expressed needs, then it is almost certain that they are worth continuing past the time when the Province (or even the ERN) are going to be able to provide staff and/or financial support to them.

So *sustainability* is not just a consideration for the ending phase of our participation in a ministry; it needs to be very much a consideration from the very beginning. It is the very same process that was undertaken with schools over the past forty years. Gradually lay-teachers were brought in and secure funding was sought from governments both state and federal, lay people were trained for leadership and they eventually took their place in total administrative responsibility. Some schools which were not sustainable were closed. Those which continue have been provided with the structures which should enable them to remain sustainable.

To a large extent, those Brothers who have been used to working within the confines of one country have been shielded from the need to make these matters a consideration when moving into new ministry. However, now that we are more experienced in moving from one part of Oceania to another and to even more distant countries for immersions, visits, renewal, and study, as well as for ministry, more of us now hopefully have a better appreciation of the differences in culture that exist from one place to another. In addition, we are also better informed about our role as religious 'missionaries', which is one that involves being midwife, mentor and then moving on to "fly free as Edmund did before [us] to new horizons, to the unknown, the not-yet imagined."

The objectives of 'secular' bodies in the field of aid and development are not necessarily opposed to current Province views on what makes for good ministry establishment. AusAID, for example, sees that it is important "that the new structures are appropriate, owned by the stakeholders and supported on an ongoing basis with locally available resources."

Sustainability & structures

The way in which ministries are initially set up to work is crucial to their sustainability. This is where local input from the very beginning is so crucial. Arriving, assessing, deciding, and implementing without the inclusion of the local people is a recipe for failure. Having the local people assess their

needs and the manner in which a ministry is going to be able to function is essential. Bringing 'western' or alien methods and *imposing* them upon another culture is going to be fraught with danger. We have seen this attempted in Asia and Africa when western democracy was seen to be a good thing to import, if not impose, on another nation that had a completely different way of organising its political structures. The way in which a ministry needs to operate to ensure its survival has to be compatible with the way people in that place do their business. Assuming that the technologies that we are used to using will be able to be accessed or managed by local people when we are gone is not always well founded. This is not to say that elements incompatible with the gospel or ethical standards must not be rooted out; if corrupt practices are allowed to remain in place, for example, this will militate against the sustainability of the ministry, for reasons that are connected with both finance and integrity.

Sustainability & culture

This second consideration is closely related to the previous one. If practices are instituted that run counter to the genuine culture of the local people, then once the ministry becomes theirs to be responsible for, it will not survive without massive restructuring that the local people might not be capable of managing. It is not always easy for newcomers to identify 'genuine culture', and so the identification of elders and cultural leaders to act as guides is crucial, as it is to identify the local initiators, 'movers and shakers'. It goes without saying (or does it?) that good prior preparation for ministry in another culture is essential. This needs to include a development of an attitude of respect for and openness to intelligence and sacredness of 'the other', as well as an expectation of meeting the God who is already present before the newcomer arrives.

Even in the early stages of the life of the ministry it might become obvious that there are things that are just not working, people who are not working together as they should be, processes that do not seem to fit. These are sure signs that there is some clash between the practices that have been imposed and some elements of the local culture that have not been taken into account. These could be as simple as misunderstanding of terminology, or the expectation that people will work together who are culturally not meant to associate closely together. Assigning roles to men or to women that are not culturally appropriate can be another trap. Seeking advice and asking good questions in the first place can help to avoid such mistakes; constant review and re-assessment are required.

Sustainability, capacity building, and exit plans

It might seem to be premature to be considering how we might exit a ministry while we are looking at its establishment, but that is the reality that we need to consider. We are in ministry for the purpose of serving the best interests of the people, not to serve the interests of expatriate missionaries and volunteers. If careful consideration of structures and the culture is part of the consultative establishment processes, then the ministry outcome will be one that is genuinely needed by the people for their wellbeing and advancement, and one that they will be able to manage sustainably in the future.

We can do no better than to take our cue from John the Baptist – "He must increase, and I must decrease." Our work in ministry must include a focus on identifying the talents and gifts of the local people and building their *capacity* to carry on the ministry for themselves. This should be the normal attitude towards missionary work; we work from the very beginning with a view to making ourselves redundant. It is not just preparing for the day when we are no longer able to provide

people or material support; it is an attitude integral to the way the ministry functions from the beginning.

So there needs to be a realistic *exit strategy* that includes a probable timeline and necessary processes that will enable the handing over of responsibility for the management of the ministry to local people. This means leaving behind all the necessary capacity for this to happen. It has been suggested that these areas need to be considered:

- Sustainability strategy – developed by the local ministry
- Sustainability of grassroots benefits
- Sustainability of improved institutional capacity
- Maintaining future recurrent budget.

The exit strategy might better be expressed as a *phase out* strategy, as it provides the idea of a more gradual process. This is linked to avoiding the dangers of having funding and assistance attracted to a project over a long period of time because of the presence of an inspirational and charismatic leader. While this might be the initial impetus for donations, sponsorship, volunteers, and grants to flow, it cannot be allowed to continue over a long period, establishing as it does a dependency (and perhaps a co-dependency). It creates a very real risk to the maintenance of the recurrent budget once that person is no longer associated with the project. Such personalities have to be wise and humble enough to educate donors and sponsors to see that their assistance as applied directly to the outcomes of the project rather than to support for the charismatic expatriate leader. In this case, the support is more likely to continue or at least phase out rather than stop suddenly once the charismatic figure disappears. It is also important that there is some coordination of the donor effort. As AusAID puts it, “Sustainability objectives can be compromised if individual donors promote different development agendas and have different management and accountability requirements.” The Oceania Province policy of channelling out-of-country donations through the Edmund Rice Foundation has obvious merits in this regard.

Sustainability, partnerships and networks

The building of local networks and good partnerships can also enhance the sustainability of ministry. It is more likely that a ministry with shared responsibility across more than one organisation will have a better chance of survival. Building good relationships with local expertise and working in partnership with other qualified and appropriate agencies can only be a good thing. We cannot afford to allow the project to be constrained by our wanting to take sole credit for its success; it is not about our success – it is about the effective building of the capacity of the local people to make their own choices and to have access to what they see as a decent life for themselves and their children.

More information can be had via internet resources.

See *Promoting Practical Sustainability* produced by Published by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), Canberra, September 2000.