

‘When the bishops repented’

The resurrection of an organisation

I knew from the very start that it was not a rational decision to accept the consultancy with the Tangababwe Evangelical Fellowship (TEF). The off-hand mention in the terms of reference that the secretariat ‘was closed about three years ago due to resource constraints, weak leadership and lack of a clear direction at the time’ set alarm bells ringing. What could I offer an organisation in such severe crisis? Yet my attempts at polite refusal by asking a barrage of negative questions failed to deter TEF and a few weeks later I found myself on a plane wondering, ‘What have I let myself in for?’ In fact it turned out to be the most remarkable experience of my professional life as I observed an all-but-dead organisation transformed in what seemed to me a supernatural way.

The initial interviews with key leaders confirmed my worst suspicions. I had never come across an organisation that was so sick. The destructive internal fighting in TEF meant some leaders refused to sit in the same room as others and one had even burnt down another’s church. For the last few years TEF had been little more than an instrument of the State President to counter any opposition to his increasingly autocratic misrule. As soon as the mainstream churches made a statement about human rights, TEF would react with a partisan defence of the government. The chair and the vice-chair of TEF were having regular meetings at the State House and there were strong rumours that they had received gifts of money and farms. One of the TEF leaders was reportedly involved in a high-profile land-grabbing incident. I was later told: ‘You were selected on the basis that you could not be intimidated by powerful political authorities’ – though even in the preparatory interviews I was threatened with deportation should the workshop not turn out well. I was relieved that I had insisted on working alongside two local consultants who knew the sensitivities and volatilities of the context much more intimately than I did.

Not surprisingly donors had long since departed from TEF. In the words of the General Secretary:

‘No-one wanted to be associated with TEF. We wouldn’t pay our rent. We had no projects. We should have been buried.’

But this recently appointed part-time General Secretary refused to accept that TEF be buried. He felt ‘certain that God wanted to revive TEF and restore it to integrity, honesty and fellowship’. But the ongoing ‘shameful behaviour’ meant that he had reached the point where he felt that if God did not do something he would quit. He had done all he could. As a last resort he had the idea of a capacity building workshop. He was encouraged in this by the regional adviser from a donor agency (which had supported TEF in the past) who believed in the importance of such church consortia, but also understood the political dynamics of the country. Together they persuaded a highly sceptical donor to finance the workshop.

At the same time a small group of women from one of the TEF churches felt inspired to pray for TEF’s revival. They organised regular prayer meetings in the capital and took a team to the venue three weeks beforehand to spend three days praying for the event.

As the facilitators sat down to plan the workshop we wondered what on earth we could do. We were acutely aware of our inability to do anything about TEF in our own strength. We believed we had to depend on God's intervention to change people's hearts. The day and a half we had spent on initial interviews had quickly revealed the extent of the problems. Disillusionment and fear were rife. We too contemplated the week ahead in fear and trembling, comforted only by the fact that TEF was so sick that we had nothing to lose. The corruption at senior level was so acute that we felt that probably the best options would be to facilitate them to allow TEF to die without bringing more shame on those involved.

Participants' fears were further exacerbated by the selection of a remote hotel owned by the President as the venue for the workshop. Many were reluctant to come for fear of the rooms being bugged. On the bright side, I hoped this meant that only the board and General Secretary would attend, as it would be much easier to handle the difficult issues in a small group. As it turned out, my hopes for a small attendance were dashed. 37 participants from many different churches were there, including more than ten bishops, almost every board member and some highly respected non-evangelical church leaders. On arrival people were very suspicious and quite anxious to leave. Many were expecting confrontation, condemnation and conflict.

We had decided it would be best to concentrate for the first day on less threatening topics to try and reduce the level of fear. We started by asking participants what they thought was God's vision for TEF. The vision exercises enabled participants to explore their environment and out of it 'came a realisation that as evangelicals we were existing in a world of our own, out of touch with issues of poverty, HIV and democratic politics', according to one participant. They saw that if they were to tackle these issues they had to collaborate with other groups and become less isolated. The exercise encouraged the diverse participants to unite in defining a common vision.

A shared understanding of TEF's history was developed in the afternoon by using a 'river of life' exercise, whereby groups of participants drew the history of the TEF as if it were a river; events were represented as rocks, crocodiles, rapids along the way. This exercise allowed many of the current issues (which were a product of their history) to surface and to be discussed in a non-threatening way. This was important because fears were still prevalent. Yet despite the unrelenting tension, the exercise proved very illuminating. It enabled a candid examination of the past, but in a surprisingly light-hearted way. According to one: 'Somehow there was a willingness to reckon with the history. It can only have been the Holy Spirit that removed this defensiveness.' After the different pictures were explained, participants filed past for a gallery walk, in a way that inadvertently resembled the viewing of the dead body at an African funeral.

The chair had to leave the next morning, but before doing so, publicly acknowledged his failings and accepted responsibility for many of the errors that had left TEF in such a state. This set the tone for the short biblical devotion that followed. The message was that law and judgment are like a mirror, they have no power to change people. Transformation comes by accepting God's grace and forgiveness. At the end of the message there was a long silence, before, one by one, each participant fell on their knees. Many major church leaders were openly weeping and confessing how they, as TEF, had failed to be an authentic evangelical voice. As one participant described: 'When the Bishops repented, God showed up.' Another

explained:

‘What brought this change was when the leaders were honest enough to own up to their failings.

‘They realised that they had been a hindrance and repented.’

As facilitators we felt this marked a spiritual breakthrough. Spiritual conviction took centre stage and the highly charged emotional pressure was vented.

But what was I to do next? The following session was planned to be a cerebral process of prioritising internal issues using cards, but it did not seem appropriate. Instead we decided to deepen and personalise this corporate, emotional confession by asking each person to specify what past patterns of behaviour they needed to turn away from and to ask for forgiveness from each other. We sent participants off individually to pray and think of how their own behaviour had contributed to TEF’s downfall, insisting that they should not judge anyone else. After this reflection, people formed four different peer groups and confessed their failures to each other. We assigned a ‘pastoral facilitator’ to each group, who was highly respected and not significantly involved in TEF previously. The small groups prayed together before reconvening. These pastoral facilitators then presented the content of the confessions to the group as a whole. There was a strong sense that TEF had been ‘adulterous’ in its affairs with the President and a time of prayer seeking forgiveness from God and from each other followed.

It was astounding. In just one morning all the dirt and dross had been unearthed, confessed, repented and forgiven. To me this was nothing short of miraculous. I was the most surprised person there. Rather than lead facilitator, I felt I had been observing an amazing experience of God transforming people’s hearts in a way that was to bring about the resurrection of TEF.

After lunch there was a clear sense that TEF should have a new birth, not a funeral. In the afternoon participants answered the question in groups of why TEF should exist. The different mission statements were discussed and synthesised into a new TEF core purpose.

The final day was devoted to developing TEF’s strategy. Participants initially prioritised different potential roles for TEF and then tried to convert the good intentions into a practical action plan for the following 12 months. Task forces volunteered themselves and time-frames were given to each under the oversight of an elected change-management team. The final difficult question was asked: how would these activities be paid for? Initial responses pointed to the need for recruiting new members and approaching donors. But some challenged the group to make their own commitment, saying: ‘In the Bible Jesus usually asked people what resources they had.’ Workshop participants pledged money quickly amounting to more than US\$5,000 – enough to keep TEF alive for the next six months.

But what has happened since?

After such a seemingly miraculous experience 18 months ago, it was with some trepidation that I returned to Tangababwe recently to find out whether all the excitement at the workshop had made a difference in practice.

It goes without saying that TEF was still an organisation of human beings and had not been perfected overnight. A lack of capacity remained a major weakness; they still had just one part-time general secretary and one young, energetic, but largely voluntary, lawyer. This ongoing situation could partly be attributed to the fact that donor trust, once lost, takes a long time to recover. Furthermore some of the action points prioritised at the workshop had not been fully implemented or taken a long time, including the review of TEF's constitution which delayed the necessary changes in the governance structure.

But these limitations are minor compared with the remarkable changes in TEF that have taken place. TEF has become much more relevant to the environment in which it operates. It has become considerably more involved in social issues – HIV and drug abuse in particular. TEF has enabled many of its church member leaders to be trained in issues of HIV awareness and home-based care for AIDS sufferers. They have even been able to channel funding support to some members for HIV projects.

More amazingly, soon after the workshop, TEF offered a public apology to the mainline denominations in Tangababwe and asked them for forgiveness. Having a clearer sense of their own identity from the workshop has enabled TEF to engage more productively and less defensively with others. As one of my co-facilitators commented: 'We have seen over and over again the new willingness of evangelical leaders to work together with other churches of all denominations, way beyond traditional boundaries.' In a similar vein, one participant stated: 'The traditional isolationism of evangelicals is gone. TEF is sitting in forums in which they would not have been seen dead before.'

The TEF change process coincided with a review of the National Constitution. TEF played the pivotal role in awakening all churches in Tangababwe to the need to be involved and advocate in that process. Initially TEF called a national day of prayer for the country, and later brought together all major churches to a meeting to discuss the state of the nation. Church leaders who had previously refused to sit together now cried together and a new pressure group uniting all the churches was born. This group has since met every week and produced a comprehensive set of recommendations, many of which were integrated into the constitutional review. As one commented: 'A move that began under the umbrella of TEF has now grown to bring together the whole Christian body in Tangababwe.' The unity between churches that has been attained has had a very far-reaching impact. When a new coalition government took office after the recent elections, a prominent Cabinet Minister came to the national thanksgiving service and said that the coalition:

'took the example of working together in unity from the church.'

A remarkable statement, especially when compared with the conflict and corruption that characterised the church less than a year earlier.

Names have been changed for reasons of confidentiality