

Bringing my faith in OD

Lilliann's Story

I am sometimes tempted to keep my faith a safe distance from my work. I clearly remember my very first meeting as project adviser in a Northern mission organization. At one point the discussions seemed to be going round in circles. We were not getting anywhere. So I gently suggested: "We seem to be stuck. How about if we just stop discussing and rather pray and listen to what God tells us? After all this is His work"... After a long silence the European representative replied: "No, no, no! We cannot spiritualize this discussion. God has given us our mind, and we have to discuss this in a rational way trusting that He is guiding us". I was so surprised and hurt. I vowed to be extra careful about being as open again in a work context.

While I remain careful about how I bring my faith into OD, I am completely convinced of its importance. I have seen this on many occasions over the past few years as part of an OD team responsible for facilitating a structural change process in a Malagasy church of almost three million members. It has been a challenging assignment with plenty of ups and downs. I have learnt again and again how important it is to:

- Listen to God for practical guidance
- Accept the mystery of not knowing
- Battle with pride and self-belief
- Trust that it is God's process
- Pray for the OD process and the church
- Receive peace
- Bring prophetic words

Listen to God for practical guidance

I remember the very first workshop. I was preparing the presentation on OD. I was really struggling to figure out how I should carry out the task. After having skimmed through the literature I still didn't know what to do. Only then I started thinking that perhaps it was a good idea to ask God! I did so, and guess what? It seemed that He had already figured it out. I sat in the prayer corner at our office for quite a long time listening. He showed me a picture of a human body, a house and reminded me of the verses: Ephesians 4, 11-16 and 1 Corinthians 12, 12-27.

While listening to the Spirit, I got it all - the bones in the human body as the structure within the organization, the blood vessels as the information system, the blood as the information, the heart as the faith, the head as Christ etc. He also elaborated the relationship between the picture and the verses in Ephesians and in Corinthians. Furthermore, the four abilities described in "Enabling organizations" (Jørn Lemvik, Digni) also came into my mind... a house with four walls. The organization cannot function without one of the walls.

After my quiet time, I was so full of ideas that I sat writing everything down. That preparation went so fast. These four elements became the starting points and keys for all discussion about organization and OD within the MLC ever since. The human body and the house as metaphors fit into the Malagasy way of thinking. Many Malagasy proverbs emerged and during my presentation I enjoyed noticing people nodding to show that they had got the points.

Imagine my astonishment when the church President read the text for the opening devotion at the workshop. He also spoke on Ephesians 4, 11-16. This showed me clearly that God was present.

Accept the mystery of not knowing

While God sometimes has given me clear guidance, he does not tell me everything. His ways often

remain a mystery. I remember around this time my family and I started putting together a 5000 piece jigsaw puzzle. As I was puzzling, the Holy Spirit whispered these words to me about the OD process:

“Do not try to understand everything, because I’m working in each and everyone. In a puzzle, there are many pieces. Every piece relates to the ones closest to it. It cannot “see” all the pieces which form the whole picture. You are like one of these pieces. Your function is to fit the pieces next to you. It’s the same for every one of the other pieces. I’m the only one who sees the whole picture; do not try to pretend being me.”

Battle with pride and self-belief

At the beginning of this OD process I remember thinking: “Finally, I can share and put into practice my knowledge about OD, even if it is quite limited.” I felt I had waited long enough. Otherwise, why should God put this passion for OD in me? Initially I was really satisfied. I saw people were enthusiastic about this new way of doing things. A few colleagues started calling me “Madame OD”. I felt I had arrived. I was “at home”. Pride creeps in through the back door.

When God clearly spoke to me when planning that first workshop I suddenly realised how much I had been trying to do things on my own. I felt really ashamed. I also blamed myself for having wasted time and energy for nothing. God had prepared it all and all I needed to do was to listen to Him. This was a big lesson for me.

Unfortunately, soon after my repentance I slipped back into thinking I would do it myself. I have to continually come back to the cross repenting for not listening to God’s voice. I also have to realize that while he has given me talents, they do not make me better than others. I have had to repent of my pride thinking that I had more to share than others. Yes perhaps I had more theories than my colleagues, but the Church president and the facilitator leader still knew their people and they knew the culture far better than I did. I learnt, and I’m still learning to know my place in the process and thus to submit to what I’m feeling God’s will is. Sometimes I need to respect more the views of people within the church and their ways of carrying out the process, even if it sometimes didn’t fit my own ideas.

At other times I feel too unworthy. Especially when I am stressed and tired I ignore his quiet invitation. Yet these are the times I need His guidance and comfort the most. I feel that everybody around me is more devoted than me. Consequently, I’m falling in the pitfall thinking that I’m not the right person to do this job because I’m not sensitive enough to God’s spirit.

Trust that it is God’s process

I have had to learn and relearn that OD in the church is not about me. I remember God speaking to me quite clearly one time saying: “Lilliann, this is not your process, it’s mine. I’m in control, and you’re surely not. Listen to my voice, do what I’m telling you to do. Your responsibility is to make sure you stay close to me and listen to what I’m telling you, I’ll take care of the rest. What the other facilitators say or do is not of your responsibility, I’m working in each of them as I’m working in you. Nor are the outcomes your responsibility. You cannot control everybody and tell them what to think, how to react or what to do. That’s my job. Let go. Trust me.”

So now I ask God about my role and place at every workshop or meeting. It’s never the same. I usually come feeling that I’m outside my comfort zone. I quite often hear God’s voice saying; be silent, listen, watch, learn, wait. I had to listen far more than I’ve spoken. I’m trying to submit to God. That is what I really want. Even though I still find myself searching for honour, wanting to be seen and heard instead of giving glory to God, seeking His face and listening to His voice.

Pray for the OD process and for the church

Ultimately perhaps the biggest contribution I can make therefore is to pray for God's process. This may have been one of the most significant inputs into the OD team. I have actively tried to create space for God's grace in the OD team. I've been praying for change, and for general improvement of some aspect of the structure and culture, though not necessarily specific solutions. I've also prayed for the team and the church leadership in particular but not as much as I feel I should do.

Receive peace

Bringing my faith into the OD work has given me courage and peace from Holy Spirit. I know this every time I stand up and present. When faced by the need to make a presentation I always feel afraid. But I remember my personal Bible verse from Isaiah 43: 1: "Fear not, I've redeemed you, I've called you by name. You're mine". Once I start talking I become calm, full of peace and I have quite clear mind. New thoughts also sometimes come forth as I look at the meeting participants and feel the atmosphere.

Bring prophetic words

Looking ahead I feel that God has given me a word for the church and also for its international funding partners. As yet I am not sure how best to share this risky and unpopular 'word'. I feel that God wants to say: "Seek me, be bold, go forward, seek my will and I'll make you (the Church) to whom I'm intending you to be. Just listen to me and give up the right to receive financial support from your partners. Give them the freedom to not support you, lean only on me and I will show you my strength. The church built on my word will not collapse even without the money from the partners. I'm greater than money."

I don't believe that God wants the church to be bound by money. Neither do I believe that the partnership relationship itself should be ruled by money. At the same time the money is a blessing that could benefit the church. Yet the current dependence on the western partners is preventing the Church from developing itself to what it wants to be. Many church members are accustomed to thinking that whenever there is a problem, the partners are always there to rescue the Church. The partners on their side do not dare letting go of the Church, partly because they believe that the church will collapse without their support, partly because there are many supporters back home who expect them to spend their money in a particular way to help these poor churches.

I believe that the clue is both sides seeking God's face and His will, giving up the right to cooperate at all (letting go of the control) and see what God will do. I know this is risky. But I strongly believe that both sides of the partnership relationship have to give each other the freedom to let go of the other part in order to reach an interdependent partnership relationship. I don't dare think what will happen if the partners leave the church on its own. But if that's God's will to fulfill his plan with the church he knows how to provide for it... Ultimately I have to trust that this is his process and he wants the best for his people. That for me is what faith in OD is all about.