

Theology and OD

Sean is not alone. The theological challenges he raised in February's letter are common in OD with churches across the world. This paper explores some of these dilemmas with the practical wisdom shared by the learning group members. We conclude that while theology may often appear to constrain change, the Bible itself is very radical. Bible study can reveal that it is actually only our cultural interpretation of the Bible that is conservative. Ultimately as Doreen Kwarimpa-Atim said,

'It is not so much trying to change theology, but supporting the churches to apply Biblical teaching in their context and trusting the transformative power that God's word brings.'

Theological constraints on OD

Although theology (our understanding of God) should be dynamic and developing, in practice church theology often appears conservative. It tends to reinforce the status quo. It can constrain change in a number of OD areas, such as questions of leadership, decision-making, and gender. When we were invited into a church for an OD process, the power of this prevailing theology is apparent. I remember being told by a Bishop at the beginning of one workshop that: 'Remember in all this discussion of vision and values, above all else we are "Reformed".'

Theology is a highly sensitive area and can appear impervious to change. Attempts to change theology is often called 'heresy'. And we know what churches do to heretics! As OD people we touch it at our peril. Yet as Sean points out, for change to come, theology often has to change.

It is easy to get discouraged because the problems in churches manifest themselves at different levels. Sean himself identified issues at four levels in his third scenario above:

1. Theological level – for example, the role of women in leadership
2. Moral / ethical level - this is a preaching issue
3. Pastoral level - there is the issue of breaking the silence as men and women in church do not speak of these things
4. Cultural level - if faith is personal and our lives are personal then do you have the right to speak to me about what happens in my home or my marriage?

Faith in God's Power

It is important to remember in working on OD with the Church that as Genesis says that the Holy Spirit broods over the darkness. God's Spirit brings order from chaos. As the Story Corner from February 'When the Bishops Repented' illustrated, God can transform even the most corrupt and dysfunctional church bodies. We have to approach OD with churches in faith. As Doreen said:

Personally I think that in order to influence any change in Church practice and culture, one needs to have a deep and unshakable faith and conviction that beyond

Sean's Dilemmas

1. An evangelical church that is seeking to become both more 'missional' and more 'participative'. It appears that the theology of the church in practice (even if not in theory) supports an exclusive community with a primary leader who drives an attractional Sunday-centric process. How do I help them move to a team lead, inclusive, participative, outward-looking community? Does this require a theological shift both in the pastor and in the congregation?
2. I am doing a lot of work with African pastors who one the one hand are engaged in integral mission but on the other do not have a theological framework in which to articulate what they are doing. They appear open to "every wind of doctrine" and are thus incredibly vulnerable. How can I help?
3. We are working to mobilise an evangelical network of churches to address the issue of gender-based violence. But do we not need to also address gender inequality in the structure of the church to address gender-based violence? If so, how do we go about such a major task?

theological knowledge and belief is the transforming power of God, in individuals. Otherwise some of these challenges can be seen as humanly insurmountable, I know of many who have given up trying to influence change in churches and their institutions describing them as 'too rigid.'

People do not change because their theology changes, but because they experience God. Prayer is a vital, but perhaps underused tool, in OD – a topic we will explore further in another letter.

- *How do you think change occurs in people (and organisations)?*
- *What is God's role in that?*
- *What is your/our role?*
- *When have you experienced God's presence in organisational change?*
- *What are the implications for our OD?*

Start with culture

The second thing that learning group members pointed out was that perceived theological constraints are often in reality cultural constraints. It is not our Bible that constrains change, but our culturally-influenced interpretation of the Bible. So rather than challenge theology head-on, learning group members pointed out the value of starting with culture. In Doreen's words:

From my experience with working with churches, I have learnt that it may be easier to start with trying to change practice and culture and this in turn may influence theology. Starting with trying to influence theology straight away, (especially if you are a lay person) it is usually resisted and seen as 'rocking the boat' and more often than not, the process will be blocked. However, causing change in culture and practice has to be rooted in the belief and conviction that the church exists to have a positive impact on the society in which it exists and its mandate lies in the word of God. And that God has the power to transform situations. Once you believe this and get 'allies' within the church structure (does not have to be the top) who believe this, then you have a stepping stone.

The Tearfund case study from Zimbabwe and Burkina Faso in this month's Story Corner shows how stereotypical attitudes to gender and therefore HIV are culturally determined, rather than based on a particular theology. Or for example, there have been cases of some leaders from churches who attract big followings, not because of specific convictions but merely due to their special likings for such individuals. Very often what such leaders say is never questioned. The resulting emphasis on charismatic, person-centred leadership is more about the culture of the denomination or the individuals concerned than any specific theology. Thus when new leadership takes over the prevailing culture may change.

Organisational structures vary between churches. Denominations display different cultures. So far we have not had much feedback from learning group members about this.

- *When we go into different churches, what questions do we ask?*

Use the Bible

Theology can be a driver for change as much as a constraint. One time I remember starting a workshop with what appeared to be a conservative church by asking, 'What does your faith/theology say about human change?' The responses were illuminating and provided a dynamic energy to the whole change process.

Respondents also emphasised that while theology may appear conservative, the Bible is extremely radical. The Bible is a powerful tool to use in promoting change. But perhaps

not by OD people preaching with it, but by allowing people the space to discuss and interpret it in their context.

Betsy Mboizi writes about how we can find principles of participation and empowerment in the early church:

When we look at the early church it was characterized by participation and team management. See the way the Apostles moved around in pairs and sometimes trios. Decisions were collectively made Acts 4: 23-24, 32-35; Acts 1:15, 21, 23-26; Acts 2: 14. In my view this was essential for support and growth of the early church. In Acts 13 we see Barnabas and Saul sent off. Even after they disagreed over John Mark's behaviour, each one of them paired up with another. Paul with Silas and Timothy while Barnabas teamed up with John. This story concludes; "So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers (16:5). Even Christ himself chose a team to work with, as Christians we should follow His example.

The Tearfund case study on gender used a variety of verses and Bible studies (Genesis 1:27; 1 Cor 7:2-7; Galatians 3:28; Eph 5: 21-23) to explore biblical, as compared with cultural, attitudes to gender.

Again Doreen tells an encouraging story:

Gender and OD

I was in charge of a gender desk for a consortium of three mainline (traditional) churches whose view of gender varied greatly. One of my outputs was to develop a gender policy for the consortium. After months of various attempts to even get the issue of gender discussed, I realized that my first step would be to get all the three churches to at least a common understanding of gender, and what this meant for the church. With the support of a consultant, I developed a gender sensitization tool that linked key gender issues to Biblical examples and teachings. I decided to have separate sessions for each of the churches, getting relevant participants for these events was difficult and if it was not for the fact that I had some 'allies' I would not have succeeded. In a number of cases I did not get the target group I wanted, nevertheless I chose not to make it an issue but use the space I was given.

The sensitization process took three days for each church, the methodology was largely participatory and contextual (I had spent some time trying to understand each church's teaching and practice on gender), to enhance self reflection and discussions. The content was the same and as earlier mentioned, I selected Biblical references on key issues like, gender and culture, the various roles and participation of women in the Bible, how Jesus related to women etc. I can not say that I influenced a theological shift, but I know that there was change in attitude and this has spilled over into practice. One participant who is a Reverend later confessed that this exposure has since then influenced his sermons and the way he treats women, especially his wife.

The process of policy development took about two years and I left before it was approved by the church 'hierarchy' but I know that the few who experienced those sensitization events and have had space to change practice have done so, some churches have increased the meaningful participation of women in church matters since then through larger representation.

We may not be able to change church theology, but we can help them focus on the core elements that support change in order to overcome the cultural elements that get in the way. Even the very act of engaging in discussion of the Bible may be transformative. The Bible is probably most important OD tool to use in change.

Useful OD methods

In addressing organisational culture issues, there are a number of OD methods that may be useful. We often need to surface issues that are hidden below the surface. There is often a discrepancy between theory and practice that needs to be brought into the open.

This often has to be done with considerable sensitivity and caution. To do this requires us to develop a very good understanding of the prevailing culture. This involves asking questions. I like the quote from the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Church:

'If you knock on our door, we may let you in.
If we let you in, then you may enter.
If you show you care, listen and respect us,
then you can start asking questions, not giving us answers.
If we change it is because we develop our own answers.
It will take time'

Yet we should also remember that at times it may be valuable to disturb the system and confront attitudes head on.

Respondents also spoke of the value of using participative methods, and separating groups for discussion. They also pointed out the importance of engaging with church leadership if at all possible. In later letters we will explore the relationship between OD and leadership and examine leadership coaching with church leaders. Yet even if leaders are not accessible, learning group members said it was important to work with whoever is there. Change can come from anywhere. They warned that culture change in the church is a long process. It is a tiring process and therefore important to celebrate small victories whenever possible.

Some concluding thoughts

There is a time for everything. Even if change is needed by a church, the timing may not be God's timing. Sometimes things have to get worse before they get better. Our engagement with churches and OD should be marked by patience and love.

What appears to be theology that constrains change in churches, is often more about how beliefs are culturally interpreted. For OD practitioners this means that we should:

- Develop our own theological thinking, but refrain from imposing it on others;
- Explore the church's theology and how it is applied in practice
- Put faith in God as the author of change
- Start with cultural issues rather than theological ones
- Use the Bible as a radical tool in participatory discussion and as a lens to interrogate any theological propositions
- Use good practice OD processes

In Doreen's words:

It is not so much trying to change theology, but supporting the churches to apply Biblical teaching and references in their context and trusting there is transformative power behind the Word and creating the spaces for God to work.

Some questions for next time

1. What experiences do you have of seeing God's power in OD?
2. Do you have any experiences of the misuse of theology for personal gains and what were you able to do?
3. Which biblical passages have you found most useful in OD?

4. Which exercises have you found useful in surfacing discrepancies between church practice and biblical theory?

Rick James March 2009