

Learning patience in facilitation

By Dr William Otiende Ogara

I know change takes time. But, like many of us, I still want to see visible and quick results. At the end of each intervention, I want to feel I have made a difference. But sometimes change does not happen immediately. To what extent am I willing to allow enough time and space to see tangible results? To what extent are funders able to stick with difficult church partners who only change slowly? To what extent are our partner organizations willing to sacrifice their pride for the sake of the future of their organizations, even when it is clear that their acts have been questionable and not above above board? A recent experience with an East African Diocese reminded me of the importance of patience in facilitation.

Three years ago I led a change management team in a Diocese I'll call Mzima. It was a really tough assignment. Trust between the Diocese and the funders had almost completely broken down in the face of financial mismanagement, weak governance and a lack of leadership from the Bishop. As external change agents we were asked to lead a change management team which included staff from the Diocese as well as some of the funders. The situation was so explosive, part of our role was to mediate conflict.

We did what we could at the time. We were ready and willing to assist them implement some of the internal control recommendations which had been highlighted as missing by the auditor. What we experienced was growing reluctance and apathy from the Diocesan team. We knew that just because the controls were in place did not mean that they were being followed. We encouraged the Bishop to realize that he was ultimately responsible for the financial management and reputation of the diocese. Not much was happening and yet time was running out with growing impatience from all parties involved. Maybe we just had to hope that one day the Diocese would realize the need to be open and transparent. But how long does one have to wait for this to happen?

When our contract ended, we left realizing there was so more to do on improving the management and leadership. There were still significant financial issues. We hoped that on its own the Diocese would be able to continue the momentum and goodwill created by the external consultancy after we left. Perhaps this was too much to hope for ...

As external consultants we had to move on. There were other pressing engagements. But Mzima remained on my mind. In the past two years I often wondered what had happened. I worried that nothing had really changed.

So I was delighted when I received an email from one of the funders a few months ago. She had been in Mzima and explained that although there were still major challenges, much had changed. She wrote:

"Despite being a funder, people talk to me in a different way and share more things with me than they did before. There is a markedly different atmosphere. It is lighter, more open, more joking, and yet more honest. I see the General Secretary and his deputy sitting together at meetings – something unheard of before. I notice people in the office are more courageous. They explained that 'now things are going in the right direction with financial administration and the like' with a new finance person in place. There are still significant challenges with the leadership and people are still critical of the hierarchy, but at least they are voicing their concerns. They said "It makes such a difference that the new Dean listens".

When she first arrived back she had bumped into this new Dean for the Diocese standing in a car park. He had immediately related to her what was happening:

"It was clear when I arrived that the pastors were still desperate for change. There were still so many bad relations between people. They had said to me: 'We picked you because we need someone we can talk to and who will listen to us. We know you will not be able to change anything but we need someone to talk to'... So I listen to them and we cry together. Every Monday the pastors come to me and pour out their hearts. The fact this is meant to be my day off is irrelevant."

But the Dean is not listening passively. Listening has been part of a process of healing and reconciliation. He is also challenging people to resolve differences. Again the funder related:

"The Dean was very straight forward. When I was there in October he said: 'Have you talked to the Bishop yet?' I said: 'No, not yet.' He asked: 'Why not?' I explained that I was not sure he wanted to talk to me. I did not feel easy about it. But the Dean would not let it go. He asked again: 'If he wants to meet you, would you want to meet him?' When I responded 'Yes' he called immediately. The Bishop and I met later that evening and had a good talk. To a degree we began to restore some trust. I sensed that was what he and I could manage together."

So perhaps the biggest difference in Mzima came after we, the external change agents, left. It was the Dean who was instrumental in making change happen. And it is not just one heroic individual. It is the commitment of many internal change agents. As one department head related: "When things were bad some of us said, 'It cannot be right that a few people should be allowed to ruin the Diocese of Mzima. This is our Diocese. We must stay, we cannot leave. We need to get to work and do our bit, and continue working and do our jobs.'"

It made me realise that as an OD consultant what happens in Mzima is not ultimately my responsibility, nor is it my timing. Mzima and its change process belong to God. He will bring others to lead at different times of their change journey. He will even

provide the resources, encouraging disillusioned funders to remain faithful; to refuse to accept that all is lost and to enable Mzima to be slowly restored to its lost glory.