

## **FROM ANGER TO LAUGHTER**

"Should we cut down the mango tree or the kachere tree? When they grow too close to each other, the mango does not grow well". Local church leaders posed this question as I started a review of their relationship with a large international organization. Before I could respond, another added: "These people are just using our name. They have all the resources and too many good vehicles. Just look at all these 4 X 4 cars parked outside. While they have all this, we do not have anything - not have even an old computer."

I was afraid. I could sense how bitter these people were. Their international partner of 25 years had just announced they were registering as an independent organization, outside of the church. The church leaders felt angry and betrayed. Deep down my heart, I prayed: "Oh God, help me to work with these people so that they will be able to see the bigger picture"

### **In the name of the church**

Everything appeared to have gone relatively smoothly in their partnership for the past 25 years. The International partner was registered in Malawi through the local church. All the activities were implemented under the name of the local church. The assets were bought in the name of the church. The International partner had over the years gathered considerable experience and skills in the name of the church. Programmes grew and the relationship seemed rosy. Local and international donors were enthusiastic and supportive.

The local church had a good reputation in the villages where programmes were implemented. They believed the international partner was a development arm of the church. They were convinced nothing would change in their relationship... But one day the International partner announced its plan to become an independent International organization. The saga started.

### **Stepping into the Wilderness**

As an external facilitator, I was not in a position to respond to the questions posed to me. I merely tried to understand the meaning attached to the images they brought up. Clearly the mango tree was the local church that had been in existence for sometime and had invited the International

partner to Malawi. This international partner had now grown so big it was choking the local church.

I asked myself: How do I begin to enable these people to shift in their thinking? Working with a church, I looked for biblical stories they could identify with. I started by getting the top leadership of the church to envision their church in 5 to 10 years. I linked this vision with the land of Canaan. I reminded them of how the children of Israel had to move from Egypt. We remembered how difficult it was for the children of Israel to accept the change, especially when they encountered problems in the wilderness. This image helped the church to slowly shift from their bitterness. They began to focus on what they could do.

But there was still a lot of anger and fear in the room. It came a point where I felt they had to make a choice. I could not force these people to agree with each and everything that international partner had proposed. All I could do was to highlight the pros and cons of the process for both of them. I had to put them on the spot. After all they were the ones responsible.

So I gave them questions to reflect on and asked whether they were willing to start the journey to Canaan. This was a difficult time for me as a facilitator. The whole general assembly was there. They had to make a decision. I could not do much if they were not ready to change and go forward. I left the conference room for them to discuss and all I could do at this time was to pray for God's intervention in their decision.

### **A Land of Laughter?**

I was called back into the conference room. I was worried. Yet I heard laughter. People were very open. They had agreed to start the Exodus, to the land flowing with milk and honey. I was so happy and excited that they made this decision. And yet, we know this Exodus had just begun. There is still a long way to go to reach their Canaan.