

Genuine honesty in partnerships

By Lilliann E.R. Våje

We all have agendas in an OD process. By definition, all stakeholders must have a stake. My experience of an OD process for an African church, supported by a European funder, showed me how important it is to be really honest about our motives - what we really want from the OD process. Unless we surface different agendas at an early stage, and negotiate openly, these differences may erupt later, often in dysfunctional and distressing ways. OD never takes place in a vacuum of a single organisation, but always in the context of its wider relationships - in particular its partnerships with funders.

Tangababwe church had been around for almost 150 years. By 2008 it had grown to over three million members. The church realised that its old constitution and structure were no longer appropriate for its size. There were only two full-time leadership positions leaving the President and General Secretary woefully overstretched. The feeling was 'We have outgrown our shoes'.

Around the same time, the major European donor to Tangababwe, (which we will call FBO) was also increasingly anxious to see change. They felt that Tangababwe church was not very organised or accountable. This was increasingly problematic for FBO as their own back donors were asking difficult questions, especially on the financial side. FBO was also concerned that power rested almost exclusively with the clergy, leaving lay people, especially women and youth, highly marginalised.

When Tangababwe church approached a different funder to help them set up an emergency unit to respond to natural disasters, the consultant appraising the application recommended an OD process. Both Tangababwe church and FBO saw the possibility for the OD process to meet their distinct needs, but were not fully open with each other about what their aims were (perhaps they were not even aware themselves what they were). FBO wanted to be a good partner, so asked Tangababwe church 'What do you want from this process?' Tangababwe church, also wanting to be a good partner, responded with what they thought FBO wanted to hear. Positive words like 'strengthening', 'effective' gave the impression that they were on the same page. So they agreed to merge the constitutional revision with a broader OD initiative. With three other partners, FBO generously agreed to fund a two-year intervention with six-monthly 'Round Table' monitoring meetings.

OD Process

The OD process started well. It had a clear mandate and support from the church leadership. They set up an internal team of six people (the funders felt that getting an external person would become too expensive). The OD team designed and facilitated a highly participatory process over 18 months with seven regional workshops for three days each, involving almost 500 people. A separate editing team collated, analysed and interpreted the workshop responses. They produced a revised constitution and also some significant recommendations for structural change. These included:

- Five paid leadership posts in structure, rather than the current two
- Greater role for women in the church
- More involvement of lay people in decision-making

In November 2011 the editing team presented these recommendations to the Church Council (of 120 elected members). After two days of discussion, the Council accepted the revised Constitution, but rejected the proposals for structural change. They voiced legitimate concerns about financial sustainability, but perhaps more importantly, influential individuals were very fearful about what would happen to their power, should these changes come about. The Council, with a vast majority of male clergy, was not disposed towards the proposals for a greater role for women and laity. The Council

believed that these recommendations were being pushed by the donors who were trying to exert control. They felt the donor emphasis on financial accountability demonstrated a lack of trust. Furthermore the Church was still hurt and angry that the month before, the funder had pulled the plug on an agricultural school project after more than 25 years. They believed this might be part of a broader exit strategy.

When the Round Table meeting took place later that month, the funder representative could not contain his frustration. *“We are so disappointed by this OD process. We trusted you and expected far more and bigger changes than this. You have just focused on salaries for church leaders. This OD process is a complete failure. You have not addressed the relationship between the lay people and the pastors, nor the role of women and the youth. This is about injustice. We have raised these issues time and again over the years but it seems that there is no willingness to take that seriously in the church”* He went on in a threatening tone, *“We have a moral problem in cooperating with a church with those views.”*

Everybody held their breath. The room was silent. I expected the Church President to raise his voice in defence. He did the opposite. He admitted that they had not addressed these issues and promised to do more in future. While it was good to acknowledge their failings, at the same time I wondered if perhaps he should have been less submissive. He might have pointed to the significant progress the OD process had made - even if these were not the exact ways that the funder had hoped. Although the church had shied away from important decisions about greater involvement of laity, women and youth, this was the first time that the church had really started to take a hard look at itself. While the Council backed away from fundamental changes, they were now at least talking about these important values. The OD process had empowered a lot of church members to speak out for the first time. Things were happening on the ground.

It made me realise how hard to really predict the results of an OD process. We need to have realistic expectations of change for a 150 year old church, with deep-rooted traditions. OD may be more about breaking up unploughed ground, beginning to challenge peoples' long-held perceptions and beginning to change attitudes. As one church leader concluded: *“We admit the need for change, but we need time to reflect on it. We cannot decide such big issues in a three-day workshop”*

This experience also taught me a lot about ownership of OD. What had begun as something initiated by the church became something seen as funder manipulation. Towards the end of the process I handed out to the other five members of the OD team, Lena Boberg's paper *‘Whose process is this anyway?’* (Letter 15 <http://developingchurches.ning.com/page/lead-articles>) as it explored issues of ownership of an OD process. My colleagues started laughing. I asked them why. They said *‘Has she been here before? The article is about us’*.

But the biggest lesson for me was about up-front honesty. While the funder had raised issues of laity, women and youth over the years, they did not state clearly that this was what they wanted addressed by the OD process. And while revising the Constitution was part of the Church's plans, again they did not make it explicit that this was what they saw as their main objective from the OD process. As a result critical underlying expectations remained implicit, assumed and therefore unclear. Because each partner was quite dependent on the other, they did not want to expose any differences. Yet just because they chose not to reveal their different agendas, this did not mean the differences went away. They simply surfaced later. OD processes need to be built on genuine honesty. While there was enough trust between the two long-standing partners to withstand such an angry outburst at the end, how much more productive would it have been if we had enabled partners to be more honest with themselves and each other right from the start?