

# Revitalising the Zimbabwe Council of Churches

In early 2009 the Zimbabwe Council of Churches was both morally and financially bankrupt. Over the previous three years they had lost all their main donors through repeated failure to speak out about the deepening crisis in the country. Its silence in the face of increasing atrocities was interpreted by members, staff and donors as showing it became politically compromised. To make matters worse, the Reserve Bank had just seized all their foreign currency reserves. They had no money left to pay staff or creditors.

Yet ZCC has a critical role to play in the wider changes in Zimbabwean politics and society. Its members represent almost 25% of the population. The new and fragile Government of National Unity is asking ZCC to play a leading role in national healing, to promote reconciliation and to be part of the Constitutional Review.

Change in ZCC, however, had already started. A completely new board had been elected in late 2008. They recognised and admitted to past failings of ZCC and immediately initiated a revitalisation process. They invested considerable time, energy and courage in bringing change. They initially concentrated on sorting out the books and managed to complete the financial audit for 2008. They also set about replacing the compromised General Secretary, whose ten-year term of office had expired some years earlier. They called for a donor round table in May and asked if I could help. My OD role turned into one of facilitated mediation between the different parties. ZCC and its donors managed to broker an agreement that gave ZCC sufficient funding for seven months to allow them the space to change and also to make strategic contributions to Zimbabwean society at a critical moment in history.

This is the story of what I learned.

There are no 'write-offs'. All organisations have the potential for change because people change. ZCC was described as 'dead' but came back to life.

Change is about timing. I was initially approached about working with ZCC two years ago. But when I asked about leadership commitment to change at that time, it was clear that change was mostly wanted by outsiders. But with the election of a new ZCC board in late 2008 there was a dramatic shift in leadership commitment to change. This was greatly assisted by changes in the national context, with political progress such as the Government of National Unity and the priority of national healing. Change is also a process. The donor round table in May 2009 was just one part of a much larger change that had already been going on for some time.

OD is often not about one organisation in isolation. The ZCC process involves a change in the relationships between partners. For such processes to work requires highly supportive donors. Yet while we often talk about organisational commitment, in this case it was key individuals in donors with the vision, determination and patience to see change in ZCC. ZCC requested companionship from their partners. Such support is needed more when things are in crisis than when they are going well.

There can be useful 'mediator' role for a neutral outsider in a relationship change process. A good facilitator needs to be able to play different roles, including being a go-between. A mediator can identify areas of difference between parties and construct processes to address these differences. With ZCC it was important to give partners and the board safe spaces to talk. The facilitator had to keep out of the way. At one point a board member said: *'No, we do not want to hear from the facilitator, we want to hear from the donors'*.

To be an effective mediator, requires considerable trust from the parties. Although I was unknown to all but one of the donors, ZCC board, staff and partners all gave me their implicit trust. They answered openly and honestly. Without such trust nothing much would have happened.

The process required highly flexible planning. The outline for the donor meeting had to be completely changed on numerous occasions and sessions had to be developed on the basis of what had happened in the previous one. The facilitator needed the confidence to live with considerable uncertainty and again the parties had to trust him. This made it a demanding, but productive process.

The consultancy with ZCC took a human-centred approach to organisational change. The process addressed change at multiple levels:

- emotional level by creating space for discussion to restore trust
- mental level by plotting realistic and logical ways forward
- spiritual level through considerable prayer before and during the process; through repentance; and through listening to God's word for ZCC.

We tend to simply address organisational change at the mental level, using brute logic, but human beings are more complex than that.

I believe there was a spiritual dimension to change. ZCC was changing because God has a purpose for it at this time. Although the two key people (the President and main donor) were absent from the first day of meetings, one said she felt God say to her: 'Do you think ZCC's change depends on you. Pray for them instead.'

People prayed for this process more than any other consultancy I have been involved in. Churches in the UK were praying; those involved were praying both during the meetings and in the discussion groups. Although we often get frustrated by the lack of immediately visible answers to prayer, in this case I saw only the people I needed to see and all the meetings went remarkably smoothly.

This may have partly been because I was forced into spending time listening to God and trying to discern his way forward. A public holiday on a Friday meant that instead of filling all my preparation time with interviews and relentless data gathering I had a long-weekend simply to reflect on what I had heard and listen to God for the way forward. I prayed for God's word to ZCC. When I read the Bible the following verses leapt out at me in a way I had rarely experienced. Isaiah 43: 18-19 seemed remarkably apt for ZCC and its partners at that time:

Forget the former things:  
Do not dwell on the past.  
See I am doing a new thing  
Now it springs up: do you not perceive it?  
I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.

It seems that the biggest thing is whether or not God is the author and driver of the change process. When God has a purpose and presence in organisational change, the process flows more easily. For OD consultants we need to discern what he is doing and see how to join in without getting in the way. When God is doing a new thing, then we see streams in organisational wastelands.