



The Mission Strategy of Heart of Africa

By D. Michael Henderson
Executive Director

The Church in Africa has come of age.

As a "grown-up" member of the family of believers, the African Church demands a new kind of partnership with the "older churches." The former pioneer missionary methods are no longer appropriate. And, because of the maturing of the African church, wonderful new opportunities for partnership are springing up.

Think of our relationship to the African church as the relationship of a parent to a grown-up offspring, which, of course, it is. The churches in Europe and America sent missionaries to Africa when there was no Christian presence there, and they brought to birth a new "baby:" the African Church. That was 100 years ago. However, that church has now come to maturity, and the relationship with the parent naturally must change.

Just as a mother nurtures her own baby, so Western churches provided spiritual milk for the new church in Africa: Bible teaching, training, mission schools, care-giving institutions, and discipleship. And, just as a father provides for his own children, so Americans and Europeans offered material provision, guidance, and direction for the growing church in Africa. **All this was needed and necessary to bring the African Church to birth.**

However, that baby is now a young man. He is strong, intelligent, talented, and eager to make his own way in life. He is also inexperienced, perhaps naïve, and certainly doesn't have a lot of resources. So how should a parent relate to this grown-up offspring?

After several years of working in Africa, in many different countries, here are some of my observations:

A young man who's grown up doesn't want:

- To be told what to do
- To be treated like a child
- To be bound by the parent's expectations, especially in terms of career
- To be known as "the child of. . ." rather than by his own identity

On the other hand, here are some things he does want:

- An opportunity to prove his own abilities
- The ability to make a unique contribution to the "family"
- Respect for his opinions and insights
- Counsel without control
- To relate to the rest of the family as an adult, as a peer
- To receive help only when and as he requests it, not as the parents dictate

The same things are true of the Church in Africa.

With that parent/grown-up offspring image in mind, let me share with you some of the roots of the Heart of Africa strategy.

We have chosen not to do certain things for our African colleagues:

1. Bring them to America.

Why? Lots of reasons: They don't go back. The few who do return have become accustomed to an American life-style and expect to live on a higher level than their stay-at-home counterparts. Also, the training they receive here in the U.S. is so geared to service in the American church that it has little relevance to the African situation. And, it's too expensive. I just had a friend from another mission call me to say, "Our organization has spent over \$100,000 to educate a Nigerian pastor here in the U.S., and now he doesn't want to go home. Can you help us persuade him to return to Nigeria?" No, I can't.

2. Provide salaries for African pastors and teachers.

Not a good idea. Who pays your salary? A foreign benefactor who wants to do something nice for needy Americans? No, your income derives from your clients, your customers, your students, your patients, your parishioners--the people you serve. And when you stop serving them, they will stop paying you. To pay Africans for services rendered to their own people short-circuits the accountability process.

Some missions make the claim that Africans cannot afford to pay their own workers. I know that isn't true, because I work there. And what could be worse than saying to your grown children: "You'll never be able to provide for yourself. I'm going to have to support you for a long time to come."

3. Send more missionaries

I know this is a highly controversial subject, but in most places in Africa today traditional missionaries are not needed. A large majority of Western missionaries are no longer doing pioneer work, but are supporting national churches in roles that, with few exceptions, can be played by Africans.

Why is this not a good idea?

- Non-Christian Africans can best be reached by their Christian neighbors—and they *are* being reached. (One exception to this is pioneer efforts targeting unreached groups that may have historic animosities toward neighboring African peoples.)
- An American family, with all of its stuff, is very disruptive to normal life in an African village.
- The cost is prohibitive: \$75,000 per year to support an American family living in Kenya, for example. That's \$375,000 every five years.
- Christianity brought by foreigners will always be perceived as foreign.
- Very few American missionaries ever master the language(s)—most Africans speak four or five—or grasp the subtleties of the culture.

Think of it this way: Suppose Christians from France decided to establish a ministry in your community. Because of their prosperity, they receive a salary of three million dollars a year! That's the same ratio as an American missionary receives compared to his neighbors in African countries: 100 to 1. And, to get around, the French missionaries need a Lear jet. That's the equivalent of a missionary Land Rover among people who can barely afford bus fare. Of course they will need to build a French school in your community so their children can have an education, build churches with French architecture, dedicate those churches to French donors, and so on. Would you be attracted to a church like this? Perhaps, but probably not for the right reasons.

So, is there no way we can help our brothers and sisters in the African church? Of course, there is! But our help must be on the same basis as a parent helping an adult offspring.

Here are some suggestions of things that we can do

1. Provide assistance only when asked. (Just like with your grown kids.)

I was recently called in as a consultant for a mission group which wanted to start its first ministry in Africa. They had already chosen a country in which to start, had selected a property to purchase, had raised funds for the project, and had started to implement their strategy. However, they knew not one African from that country, had no invitation from any African churches, knew nothing about the country other than what they had read in the encyclopedia, and had no one in their mission who knew any of the languages spoken in that land. What was my advice to them? Stay out of Africa until you are invited! Then go only when you have established a strong relationship with local believers.

2. Give to the givers.

Jesus said, "You give and it will be given to you." (Luke 6:38) From this and other scriptures it seems evident that God entrusts His resources to those who are already givers. So should we. An African Christian worker who is already making significant and sacrificial contributions to her or his community will be the best steward of someone else's resources. Those who have a "give me" mentality will always put their own interests first, not those of the people they are supposed to be serving. So, the first step in funding African projects should be: find the givers.

The African church is weak today because many early missionaries failed to teach them to give. Because there was such an enormous gap between the resources available to the missionaries and those available to their early converts, it was easier just to underwrite African ministries from abroad than to ask local Africans to support them. In doing so, Africans were robbed of the greatest opportunity we human beings have to be like our Heavenly Father, Who "...so loved the world that He gave..." We are most like God when we give.

One of my favorite African colleagues is Jacob Auma, who was a successful Baptist pastor in western Kenya before he felt called to be a church planter among the Masai people, hundreds of miles away in Kajiado District. He and Mary and their kids left their comfortable home in Kisumu and moved into a 20 foot freight container which had been converted into a house and hauled out into a Masai community. They supported themselves among the Masai by their own gardening, tree-planting, animal husbandry, and beekeeping, and soon they were teaching their Masai neighbors to do the same. Eventually, Jacob trained several Masai evangelists and helped them establish congregations throughout the district. Why do I support Jacob and Mary Auma? First, because they are sacrificial givers. Then because they have a fruitful and effective ministry.

3. Support African initiatives.

The ministries which have the greatest likelihood of success and sustainability in Africa are those which are built on an African vision. If God stirs the heart of an African man or woman with a great dream, a plan, a mission, that person will work night and day to see it accomplished. If it is imported from abroad, there is little sense of local ownership. I have yet to see Africans really get behind a program which was brought from America and support it wholeheartedly and sacrificially.

Need I make the comparison with your own kids?

So many mission projects start like this: A group of Americans meets in Colorado Springs or Wheaton or Washington and comes up with a program they think will benefit Africans. Their attitude is: "We know what those people need!" They design a project, prepare promotional materials, raise the funds, hire personnel (perhaps even some Africans), buy the equipment, build the facilities, and launch the project. Finally they say, "Now, you Africans make it work." However, "Africanization" of projects designed in America seldom works. No matter how "good" the program is, it will always be perceived as foreign.

A good example is Theological Education by Extension. It was a great idea, developed initially by the Presbyterian Seminary in Guatemala and employing the best instructional principles available in the late 60's and early 70's. I was one of the 14 delegates at the first international workshop on TEE in Guatemala in 1972. Mission leaders from all over the world heralded "TEE" as the new wonder tool that would revolutionize Christian leadership training. Mission boards scrambled to implement TEE programs in Africa. Hundreds of TEE programs were established, and more than 120 still exist in various parts of the continent, thanks to the unrelenting efforts and large sums of money mission agencies invested to make it work. However, Africans have never warmed to the idea. They're not demanding TEE anywhere--only accepting it in some places "because the missionaries thought it was a good idea." Why not? Because it wasn't an African idea, it didn't address the need as felt by Africans, and it never had an African "champion."

How much wiser to find an African Christian worker who has initiated a ministry in response to locally felt needs, raised support for that ministry locally, and seen some degree of success. Helping that African worker accomplish his or her vision will yield far greater long-term results than importing a foreign program to address the same needs.

Let me tell you about two friends of mine from Cameroon: Dr. Alfred Njamnshi and Dr. Martin Niboh. Alfred is one of three neurologists in the nation of Cameroon. He trained in Switzerland and is on the faculty of the medical school at the University of Yaounde in Cameroon. Martin is a nuclear physicist with his Ph.D. from Kent State, and he teaches physics at College of the Ozarks. These two fellows have had a vision for their country of Cameroon since they were high school buddies: to mobilize the Christians of Cameroon to establish self-help projects in their own communities.

So here's what they have done: Three years ago, these two professors launched a movement called Torchbearers, a network of prayer fellowships throughout their native land of Cameroon. Each week, local groups of Torchbearers gather together to pray for each other, pool their resources, and encourage each other to take initiatives that will benefit their neighborhoods. They assess needs, design projects, build teams, locate resources, and implement programs. Once a year, in June, all the groups come together for a week of training and inspiration in the capital city of Yaounde. And they share "war stories" of their efforts to practice Christian community development in their home towns, cities, and villages. So far, Drs. Niboh and Njamnshi have funded this entire program out of their own pockets.

Should U.S. partners be involved in this kind of program? Yes, but only in the right relationship and at the proper levels. Massive infusion of funds could kill local initiative. Control from overseas could stifle the vision. Inappropriate American presence could brand the effort as "foreign." But, sincere Christians who are willing to build a relationship with these two African visionaries could have a powerful impact on community development in Cameroon. And be blessed in the process.

So what is the Heart of Africa strategy?

1. We work with a couple dozen African Christian workers and their spouses in several different countries, some of whom we have known for a number of years. They are all great *givers*. Each of them already has a proven and effective ministry. They are also trusted friends.
2. We work with these African colleagues to discover "bottlenecks" in their ministries or programs: Problems which could be resolved by a piece of equipment, a conference, some specialized training, a vehicle, library books, or even buildings. Or just counsel and advice. The key is to bump their ministries up to the next level without upsetting the delicate balance within the community and without developing a sense of dependence on outside support.
3. We select effective African projects which can serve as models for others to follow. The best teaching tool is a working model. Other African leaders can look at these models and adapt them to suit their own situations.
4. Faithfulness in small ventures is the key to our investment in larger ones.
5. We travel to Africa several times a year to check on the various projects first-hand, teach in African schools, and to listen to our African partners.
6. Nothing in Africa has our name on it. We don't initiate any ministries; we don't administer any ministries. Everything is African initiated, African governed, and (at least on an operational level) African funded.
7. 100% of every designated gift goes directly to the project, because we have little overhead.
8. We call our mission "Heart of Africa," because we're convinced that the solutions to Africa's needs and problems will come from redeemed and transformed hearts.

The Lord is blessing our efforts, and the endeavors of our colleagues in many places!