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## Overcoming the Big Man Syndrome in the Church

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Traditionally, learning in Africa has been participatory. A leader tells a story that is related to an issue that is of concern to the community. At the end of the story, the people ask questions of clarification. The leaders do not respond immediately, but rather ask the listeners for their view. The leader also asks directed questions that allow the people to share their views and challenge one another. At the end of the discussion, the leader makes a final summary. In this way, the final response given does not belong to an individual but to the group and eventually to the community. This method draws on the collective knowledge of the community. Consequently, they take responsibility to implement whatever new ideas have been discovered or learned.

When formal education came to Africa, the one who had been to school got the title “Know It All.” This has had a negative effect on learning. Pastors have taken on this “lecture” method to display the “big man” syndrome which does not allow the people to engage. They are expected to sit and listen and remain silent. They feel this is how the church has to operate. The pastor simply tells them what the Bible says and what they need to do. They are not able to live out what they are told because they still have unanswered questions. They do not feel they have a part in the theological issues being talked about and solutions offered. Nor do they see their role in shaping the direction of the church and the teaching. Consequently, they don't see it as their responsibility to ensure success. This has led to a situation where the church does not grow spiritually.

For some time, I have been leading workshops helping people to appreciate the value of participatory or discovery learning. This model emerged out of workshops in Kenya. One series of workshops addressed issues of Gospel and culture, and another series addressed helping traumatized people. We bring church leaders from different tribes and denominations for short workshops. Rather than telling them that what they are doing is wrong, we structure the workshop to demonstrate participatory learning. Then we ask them to do what they see us do. This is the process:

1. The leader introduces the topic through reading a story or passage of Scripture or acting a skit. (5-10 minutes)
2. Participants are divided in small groups where they discuss specific questions. The questions are thought-provoking, and designed to draw out people's experiences, suggestions, feelings and even resistance to certain issues. They may come up with new questions, too. (15-20 minutes)

3. They then report back to the big group. The big group may ask questions for clarification, add new thoughts, or challenge some of the things. (15-20 minutes depending on the size and number of groups)
4. The group then draws a conclusion together (5-10 minutes).
5. They may end with prayer concerning the issues raised.

In this way, every member is given an opportunity to share their views. The leaders act as moderators and only speak their mind when they feel that the new idea is becoming sectarian or is off the basic Bible doctrine.

During a second round of training, we take the most promising of the participants and use them to lead certain sessions of the workshop. At the end of the day, we debrief together by asking each to give comments of what went well or wrong. In this way, they learn how to criticize each other as leaders and help each other lead groups.

This simple method has resulted in positive growth as opposed to the western lecture that demeans the participants as ignorant and elevates the speaker as the only one with answers. With participatory learning, there is none who is more clever than the other but all share what they know in order to improve harmony in the community.

Some outcomes of this method that we have observed:

1. Unlike the long sermon where people do not have a chance to ask questions for fear of challenging the "big man" pastor in public, everyone feels free to ask and share what is on their minds. After their questions have been answered, then they are able to make informed decisions.
2. Elderly people feel respected as they have contributed to the discussion and were not only "shouted at" by the young people. Many fast-growing independent churches are under the leadership of younger pastors, but by using this participatory method in home Bible study, elderly people feel they are respected.
3. When a cultural issue such as female circumcision, taking of local beer, smoking, seeing traditional diviners, polygamy, or wife inheritance is discussed, the decision reached is binding and becomes a community value rather than an individual's wish over others.
4. The most positive change is to hear people saying, "The word of God says," and not, "My pastor says." For some time, the church in Africa saw the pastor as the final authority, but now people who are engaging through participatory learning are finding that the final authority is the word of God and they, too, can find answers to life's questions in it.

In trauma healing, one of the hardest issues to handle is reconciliation where tribal war has led to the murder of family members or loss of property. By telling a story, allowing people to discuss it from the point of view of what the culture teaches about how enemies should be treated compared to what the Bible teaches, and then asking them what can be done next in

the light of the Bible, we have seen a change of heart. We have seen people decide on a solution to forgive, live peacefully and decide to go back home and initiate reconciliation meetings in the community with all neighbors.

The intervention came in designing a learning method that was more cultural where people are given a story then as questions flow from it people draw life lessons out of the story together.

Because this is a learning method that is familiar to many, the leader has maintained his position of ensuring that there is peace in the community and people respect one another. On the other hand, the people appreciate being treated as grown-ups that are not lectured at, but their input contributes to the final decision the leader makes. Because of that, those who have been in the workshops, go back home with new skills of how to listen to others, how to help draw information out of them and lead them to see what the Bible says about the circumstances at hand. They assist others to know how to find solutions from the Word of God and in turn encourage them to find another person to share with and assist them to see the love of God. The people become witnesses of what God is doing in their lives. As people hear the story of what God did, they gain confidence to share their own, and in turn go and share with the others what they think God is saying to them based on His Word.

In one workshop, in 1997 in Tharaka community in Kenya, after a heated discussion by the participants on Ephesians 2:8, one person stood up and said, "I have now seen the light. Can you pray for me to receive this salvation? I will go home and explain it to my family, too, that they may come with me into this new life."

In another workshop, we had demonstrated that it is okay to lament to God and helped participants write their laments and sing, act or read them out aloud. One leader said, "So it is ok to tell my people to express their frustration to God? I am sure this will help them remove the burden they have been carrying in their hearts."

We make follow up in the villages when the pastors are leading the workshops and have seen tremendous results.

This has empowered the African church to rediscover one of its traditional values: communal participation in problem solving. As people discuss in their own language and cultural acceptable ways, they realize they are a part of the theologizing activity in Africa. This fertilizes the seed that has been sown in African soil.

Cultures vary, but in most societies people learn best through sharing and exchanging views. However, if there is a "big man", care must be taken so that he does not lose face. Discovery learning should be introduced in a manner that allows him to see his role as dominant and allows the people to feel they are not undermining their leader. It may mean that the Sunday service continues in lecture mode (preferably with some questions), and the participatory method is used in other church meetings.

Church leaders and other Scripture engagement people need to champion the use of participatory discovery methods. It is essential for the much needed critical contextualization to take place (Hiebert 1987:104-112). It will ensure that people think through their problems and solutions together and implement proposed solutions in a manner that transforms societies.

## References

Hiebert, Paul G., 1994, "*Critical Contextualization.*" in: Paul Hiebert (ed.), *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, pp. 75-92. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.

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This document was first made available as a report of a workshop held at the World Wide Scripture Engagement Consultation in Malaysia in October 2009. It is now available for download at: <http://www.scripture-engagement.org>

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