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A Surprising Find on the Mission Field

MIKE SCHRAGE

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one” John 20–22 (NIV).

With those indelible words of Jesus, the efficacy of missions work would be linked to unity for all eternity. That is why unity on the missions field has almost always been more attainable and observable “out there” than “over here at home.” Our story illustrates this very truth.

Less than five thousand out of a quarter million had heard the gospel. The literacy rate was under 20 percent. Infant mortality rates were approaching one in eight. The people group known as the Pokot was in transition from gun-toting nomadic cattle herders to settled agrarian farmers. The place was Kara-Pokot in the northwestern corner of Kenya. The year was 1984, and the plan was to tell them about Jesus and to plant new churches. We had few resources, few friends, and few church-planting landmarks to follow. Hopeless you say? Not in the least when serving the living Lord!

My wife, Karolyn, and I went to the mission field of Kenya, and like most young missionaries, we were idealistic—thinking we would immediately begin to work among this chosen people group. Within sixty days of our arrival, the government began military operations to remove hostile elements from the area. These elements had executed massive cattle raids and brought death and destruction to the area between Kenya and her neighbor to the west, Uganda. We were caught in the middle and forced to leave along with all other foreigners.

This unplanned evacuation forced us to spend months away from our newly adopted home and delayed our plan for immediate language learning and church planting. However, these were not wasted months in God’s economy. Flexibility in cross-cultural ministry is a fundamental asset to sanity and spiritual survival. During this challenging time, we met two wonderful families, Shawn and Linda Tyler and Kirk and Susan Hayes. They were neighbors to the house we were temporarily renting in Kitale, and were already involved in mission work in a different region of Kenya. We were from different states, had attended different schools, and more significantly, represented different fellowships of the Restoration Movement. Little did we know that in less than three years we would be working on the same mission team.

After several months in exile, the missionaries were allowed to return to Pokot territory. We moved back into our mud hut and eagerly plunged into the work of learning the language and culture of the people. We quickly realized that low literacy rates among the people posed a major obstacle to our work of teaching and planting churches. How do you plant God’s word in the hearts of people who cannot read and who do not have any scriptures in their own language? How will they understand church, such a foreign concept?

We needed help, so we invited Good News Productions, International (GNPI), to come and assist us. GNPI is a Restoration Movement based ministry that has its roots in Africa. Begun in the 1960s by Ziden

Nutt, this is a ministry that produces relevant media materials that are sensitive to culture (in this case to African audiences), enabling the people to learn about God in their own language. The production of such materials gives non-literate people, like the Pokot, the opportunity to both see and hear about God's work of love through the lens of their own culture.

Understanding dawns in the mind of the hearer when the gospel is communicated in a way that pays attention to language and culture. Communication is next to impossible when one quotes from the Bible using unfamiliar Christian jargon like "saved," "justified," or "righteousness." Stories of ultimate truths such as the virgin birth and the resurrection of Christ seemed strange and almost bizarre. These essential Christian stories are hard to understand under the best of circumstances. For a Pokot warrior, those biblical narratives were as hard to grasp as telling him to look up at the large, brilliant, orange, Kenyan moon and then describe matter-of-factly that men like the two of us had walked on that moon nearly forty years previously. The same incredulous stares of unbelief came, whether asking my Pokot friend to step back forty years and "walk on the moon" or to step back two thousand years and "walk into an empty tomb."

So began the quest for an effective communication process with the Pokot, and it was this quest that brought families from different streams of the Restoration Movement together. We had to start where the Pokot tribe was, socially and spiritually. GNPI helped us develop a series of filmstrip lessons. These lessons of spiritual life emphasized creation, the purpose of God, his plan of salvation through his son Jesus, and the church. In a culture of Pokot cattlemen, where there are ten different ways to intricately describe a "spotted cow" and where cows are more appreciated than children or wives, it was obvious that cattle were a main priority. Cattle supplied the milk, meat and wealth for the society. Therefore, a series of lessons explaining the God of creation through a cultural emphasis on cattle was important. This creator God would challenge the Pokot's warring ways since he desires peace with all men, including peace with their tribal enemies living in Uganda.

The dilemma was, as Bible scholars emphasize, that you "have to get someone lost before they can be found." How do you communicate in such virgin territory as the Pokot culture, which knew little about Christ? The answer is to start from where the people are and lead them to where God wants them to be. They understood that death was wrong, even the killing of an enemy was not proper. They knew that a sacrifice specifically causing the spilling of blood needed to occur in order to remedy the situation and have peace once again. The problem was that, like the Hebrew writer reiterated, they did not understand that "the blood of goats and calves" could not be sufficient (Heb 9.13). So with a foundation of sin (killing was wrong) and the knowledge that every wrong required erasing (spilling of blood for atonement), the foundation for eternity had been discovered. We then took on the simple task of illustrating the known (sacrificing of animals) and then explaining the unknown: that Christ was the final, sufficient sacrifice. This was the "good news!"

The teaching tools developed in the early 1980s enabled these African listeners to hear biblical teaching in their own language, illustrated in the context of their own culture and connected with common visual images of Pokot life. Within their own frame of reference they would "find their way to Christ." Contextualization and visualization together created effective communication, and the church among the Pokot was born. Showing a slide of a Roman soldier lancing a victim nailed to a cross to a spear-toting, multi-scarred, battle-hardened Pokot warrior connected with his heart. At the same time, this story was telling that warrior that although God had the power to save his Son (the one on the cross), because of his love for the Pokot people, he deliberately decided to let a foreigner, an infidel, an enemy soldier (the Roman guard) publicly shame and kill his one and only son. This kind of love challenged the Pokot's understanding of love. Every inclination of Pokot parents was to protect their children, thus, that which was unfathomable (to abandon a child when in distress to an enemy) became believable as an act of heavenly love.

The challenges on the missions field, like those of communication just described, illustrate the point that

in a “war zone” allies who might have had differences during peace time quickly unite against a common enemy. The task of reaching the lost, of fighting against principalities and powers in the spiritual realm, and removing the rule of Satan in the hearts of new believers, quickly took priority over order or styles of personal worship. When one is bleeding from an artery, a Band-Aid simply will not do. So when we joined forces with the Tylers and Hayes, we decided to focus on the biblical fundamentals and leave other matters aside.

When consulting our supporting congregations, they wholeheartedly agreed. On subsequent furloughs, pulpits were shared and joint meetings were held as the bonds of unity deepened. The necessity of unity for the sake of efficient outreach overshadowed cultural differences and secondary arguments. With so little time, resources, and friends on a mission field, fellowship, camaraderie, and yes, even team formation, can occur. The luxuries of the walls of division are just that, luxuries which cannot be afforded on the sparse and seething-with-death missions field.

As I mentioned earlier, we met the Tyler and Hayes families during our first term in Kenya. They were supported by the Quaker Avenue Church of Christ, while we were supported by several independent Christian Churches. In 1987, it was mutually decided that all three families working together as a team would be more effective than working separately. A fourth family, Dan and Traci Harrod, also from the Christian Churches, was added in 1989. Through God’s goodness and grace, these four families, coming from different segments of the Restoration Movement, blended their traditions and created one team with one purpose.

On the missions field, the luxury of being separate should not exist. The body of Christ is a community, a gathering of God’s elect who strive to glorify God in harmony as Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John 17 describes. As parts of a body, missionaries need other missionaries, missionaries need national Christians, and missionaries need sending congregations. The task was too daunting, the need too massive, and the time too short to quarrel over nonessentials. Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection needed to be communicated to as many people as possible by all available means. Mutual respect and love for each member of the team was part of our unspoken covenant. Those who were initially our strangers “in the brotherhood” soon became dearer than siblings.

People have wondered how this could happen: Did it take years of struggle? Was there tension? Yes, there was some struggle and tension, but as in a marriage covenant, understanding was adopted and commitment to unity led us through the tough times until we blossomed into a mission team family. Fellow missionary adults became aunts and uncles to our children, role models to watch and learn from, and mentors to respect and honor. When life is shared deeply, differences quickly pale in comparison to similarities. We journeyed together through the stages of being young families. We played, worshiped, vacationed, and laughed together. Living in Christian community breaks down barriers because your focus is on announcing the kingdom and spreading the gospel. Much of the division today could be minimized if we simply ate meals together and got to know and appreciate one another.

For many in our two fellowships, the use of instruments in worship is an insurmountable problem. For our emerging Kitale Mission Team, using an instrument in worship was not a test of whether someone loved Jesus. Moving that component to its rightful place as a “nonessential for salvation” enabled us to join forces against the true enemies (deception, death and Satan). Once that issue was decided, few others really mattered! In less than eight years of working together, over 127 congregations were started and over seven thousand Kenyans were baptized and became followers of Jesus Christ. One Lord, one baptism and one faith were proclaimed. From government to denominational officials, they did not see two or three sections of the Restoration Movement—but one! Jesus’ prayer in John 17 was becoming a reality. It is true that missions work grows faster and matures in a healthier manner when unity and harmony are present.

During this exciting time together, the influence of unity not only spread to Kenya but to neighboring

Tanzania and Uganda as well. National meetings for all believers and special meetings of missionary families were taking place for all of East Africa. This unity has been criticized at times, but anything of eternal worth will have to endure such testing.

As the work in Kitale matured, the time came for the missionaries to depart and turn over the work to capable national leadership. Transition plans in 1993 were put into motion, and by May of 1994 the Tylers, Hayes, Harrods and Schrages left Kitale. Leadership training and periodic visitation have continued to the present. One of the keys to effective church planting is a commitment on the part of church planters to stay connected to the emerging national church left behind long after house doors are locked and trunks packed.

GNPI approached the Kitale Mission Team to consider starting a regional office in Kenya. Two families accepted the challenge and the Hayes and Schrages moved to Nairobi in 1994. Although each family was from a different segment of the Restoration Movement, they moved together to start one new ministry. Just as the destiny of a tree or a baby is inside its seed, so it is with missions work and ministry beginnings. When solidarity is present from the beginning of a work, opposing viewpoints on religious non-essentials will evaporate. In this case, board members, administrative personnel, and staff were from both fellowships and worked together. Projects produced by GNPI served mission works led by both non-instrumental Church of Christ missionaries along with independent Christian Church missionaries. In this context of unity the Nairobi office has flourished, and today there are fifteen GNPI-Africa staff working on projects that are used all over East Africa. The majority of the funding is from the Christian Churches, while the current regional director is from the Churches of Christ.

The Nairobi office of GNPI joined a network of eleven other regional centers throughout the world. With a staff of seventy-five (most of whom are indigenous to where their particular GNPI office is stationed), GNPI is reaching around the globe with Christian films, DVDs, music videos, video teaching series, dramas, and more. Millions see and hear the good news in their own language and culture.

Another spin-off of the unity effort has been felt in the United States. GNPI has derived most of its support from independent Christian Churches. However, over the years, partnerships on specific projects have developed from staff working at Abilene Christian University, Harding University, and Lubbock Christian University, to name a few. In many instances, cooperation between national church leaders and mission teams on the field has created effective partnerships back in the United States for presenting God's good news to others in customized, culturally relevant ways. What a refreshing gift, as the goal always remains to do as Paul described in 1 Cor. 9.22, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some."

Over the past three decades, God Almighty has woven together two separate fellowships to do his work in Kenya. The necessity to preach the gospel can indeed produce unity. This unity does not mean conformity or animosity, but instead a solid commitment to oneness in Christ. The weaving of the "Kitale, Kenya Experiment" has had many positive effects:

1. Cooperative church planting in Kenya.
2. The initiation of a jointly funded children's home in Kitale, Kenya.
3. The establishment of the Kenya office of Good News Productions, International.
4. Regional cooperation in new mission team placement in other African nations.
5. The development of an East Africa Christian monthly periodical, *Mkristo*.
6. Submitting national church constitutions that allow for unity between sections of the Restoration Movement.
7. The establishment of several leadership-training facilities that are Restoration Movement and not "brotherhood specific" (for example, Nairobi Great Commission School and Messiah Theological Institute).

8. The founding of a Good News Productions, International office in Mbale, Uganda.
9. A new vision of one day having a Christian university in Uganda, which would be under the direction of the Harmony Project that is building unified partnership between East Africa and the United States.

Honoring God and the salvation of many is our ultimate goal. What a blessing to tell God's story of love and forgiveness to the Pokot people, to others in Africa, and around the world, and to see in the process love, forgiveness, and unity occur between brothers.

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