

# Socio-Anthropological Implications in Cross-Cultural Church Planting

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**T**his paper is a specific study of social structure for church planting. Understanding the way society is formed or organised involves the knowledge of the functions of the components therein and interaction of the components which form the structure of a society or group of people.

Social structure may also be referred to by some as social organisation. It is a very complex system and it is by it the functions, interactions, behaviours of a group of people or society are determined and functioning of its structural components understood. Thus, understanding the “*Social structure*” of a society is fundamental to effective church planting. Three reasons are advanced for this assertion:

1. Social structure is exemplified in the New Testament pattern of the church.
2. Social structure is inherent in the church planting process and
3. Social structure is foundational to contextualization of the message and the messenger.

## **Social Structure is exemplified in the New Testament pattern of the Church**

The significance of social structure can be seen in the Word of God. Some examples and cases in the New Testament show the importance of social structure to the church planting process of the early church. First of all, on the day of Pentecost

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(Acts 2), the Holy Spirit recognised the importance of using languages indigenous to the listeners present. As the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, they spoke in the different languages of their receptors (Acts 2:6). And that same principle stands true today: using the receptors' language is crucial to the understanding and reception of the message of the gospel.

Second, when there was tension/conflict which arose out of the neglect of the Grecian Jewish Widows (Acts 6:1-4) in the daily distribution of food, the Apostles recognised that socio-economic problems were significant elements in their ministry. Rather than denying the problem, or spiritualising the situation, they decided to address the problem by ensuring that other believers full of the Holy Spirit take that problem as a ministry within the church and people's felt needs (food) were ministered to.

Third, the Apostle referred to early Hebrew history in their addresses. Peter used this method in Acts 2:1-36 by his reference to the prophets and Psalms. Only Jews familiar with the Old Testament would have understood what Peter was getting at. At his defense in Acts 7:1-55, Stephen relied on his understanding of Hebrew history in addressing the Jews. Similarly, Peter and James appealed to the Jews with the use of Old Testament passages during the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-29; 21:21). These passages show the relevance of history, ancestry and pedigree to communication. In these instances, references to the Law helped them to effectively communicate to their audience. They were sensitive to the culture of their receptors and did all they could to foster understanding and good receptivity.

Fourth, and finally, the Apostle Paul used social context factors of his audience, receptors, and companions to promote understanding, interpersonal relationships, and effective ministry in proclaiming Christ to both Jews and Gentiles. Indeed, he became all things to all men for the sake of leading them to Christ (1 Cor. 9:22). Specifically, it should be realised that Paul was culturally sensitive to the Jews and Judaizers in Jerusalem. This could be seen prior to his arrest in Jerusalem and during his defense there (Acts 21:20-26; 24:10-19; 22:1-12; 23:6-8).

Paul was also careful in his dealing with the Judaizers who often accused him (Gal. 2:3-5, 11-6). Paul used his own knowledge of the law effectively and used it to introduce the gospel of salvation by faith in Christ, although he was falsely accused of preaching against the law of Moses. When he ministered to the Gentiles, he used what he knew about their background (Acts 17:16-24). Throughout the epistles of Paul, as he wrote to Gentile Christians, he reminded them of their former practices and the need to put on the new nature (Eph. 2:1-13; Col. 3:1-11; Tit. 1:15-16; Rom. 1-2).

### **Social Structure is inherent in the Church Planting Process**

There are at least four factors inherent in church planting. They are the message, the messenger, the method, and the receptor. These factors show that social structure is fundamental to that process.

*Message:* The church planter goes with a message. The content of his message is the good news of salvation by faith in Christ. But he must see to it that his message is separated from his culture. Burnett comments,

Unreached people find it confusing to know what is the real message of the gospel as distinct from the particular culture of the messenger. A tribal person may consider the wearing of Western-style clothes as an essential mark of Christianity ... The only way this may be overcome is for the missionary to identify with the people in as many ways as possible (1984:50).

If he is to succeed, his message must be put in his receptors. According to Cotterell, "the message has to be communicated across culture barriers ... and we must be sensitive to (sic) the message which is to be transmitted and encoded" (1994:166).

It is imperative that a cross-cultural church planter be able to understand what it means to separate his culture from his message and communicate instead a contextualised message to his hearers.

*Messenger:* The attitude of modern missionary societies toward social context factors can be seen in their internship

and candidate school programmes. It is common-place for mission/boards to organise a two to eight week study for prospective missionaries anticipating cross-cultural ministries. Often this programme of study involves only basic cultural information for the benefit and survival of their missionaries. While these training programmes are commendable, they are mostly like survival kits for missionaries. And although they are exclusively designed to facilitate missionary entry into the receptor's culture, they are mostly taught by foreigners and individuals who have little or no field experience with the people the missionaries will be working with. They do not answer specific questions or the issues pertinent to the socio-cultural setting of church planting.

To prepare prospective missionaries not only to survive but minister to their receptors, training programmes must utilize the expertise of national believers, experienced and seasoned missionaries who have been successful on the field. Both the missionaries agencies and missionaries must see the importance of social context factors on church planting and its ultimate effect on their outreach. The following case illustrates a social context problem often faced by church planters.

A national elder was visiting a missionary one afternoon. Arriving on the mission station, he went to see the missionary with whom he had worked for many years. When he knocked on the door, the wife of the missionary came out to meet him. Without exchanging a greeting, she asked, "What do you want?" The man replied, "Nothing, I just want to see the owner of the house". The woman then told the man that her husband was asleep and that she would take a message for him. The elder left annoyed for three reasons:

1. Without exchanging greetings she demanded to know why he was there.
2. According to custom, she should have asked him to come in and give him water to drink, then allow him to explain why he came, and
3. She expected the man to tell her what he came to tell her husband. To the elder this was improper, as he had nothing to do with and had no reason to relate to the woman. And because she indicated that her husband was napping, the elder

concluded within himself that sleeping was more important to the missionary than he was. He further could not understand why the missionary's wife behaved this way, and this incident created a barrier between the national elder and his missionary friend.

The type of problem shown in this case is common on the field because of the difference in backgrounds of the church planter/missionary and his receptors. It is a problem of social structure basic to cross-cultural church planting, and it is the responsibility of the messenger to know what the dynamics of his receptors' structure are.

*Method:* The messenger uses a method in delivering his message, known as Communication Theory. Such theory must be appropriate if the message is to be understood.

According to Burnett,

Our methods and practices must be culturally relevant. We must start with people where they are, and meet the needs that they feel ... All too often the missionary to the inner city is running a program based on sub-urban church patterns, with sunday schools organised along structures only relevant to the middle class. Our church time tables, patterns of worship, and modes of evangelism must be relevant to the local church in which we are placed by God (1984:50).

It is crucial that the church planter realise this if he expects his message to be heard, understood and received. There is no apology for being naive or ignorant concerning the importance of the relevancy of one's method.

*Receptor:* In addition to the need for an appropriate form of communication, the need for the church planter to relate his teaching to the issues confronting his receptors is significant. For instance, teaching regarding full-time service and commitment should be preceded by a thorough analysis of the socio-cultural implications resulting from obeying it. The following case exemplifies cross-cultural difficulties in calling national believers to full-time service.

Samson and John attended the same church until they were called into full-time ministry. Both of them came from the same tribe, and were married with families to

support. In addition, they were the bread winners of their extended family members which consisted of their parents, brothers and sisters.

Soon after their call to the ministry, they began to experience some pressures from their families. By going into full-time service they left their jobs without the consent of their wives and members of their extended family. Because full-time ministry promises no financial reward, it upset their kinsmen who had depended upon them previously.

Samson and John, however, did not realise the serious implications of this economic problem and so did not pay attention nor care to address it. They were happy to have made a commitment to their Lord in service. But they forgot that this act of commitment was regarded as an irresponsible act by their families. As expected, they were unable to discharge their social obligations, though they were no longer earning salaries. Their support was inadequate to supply the needs of their family obligations. It is ironic that no one told Samson or John about this problem before they decided to quit their jobs. Although they were being used to reach the lost, they lost opportunities to reach their immediate family members.

Had Samson and John realised the serious social and economic implications that their decision would have on their extended families, they would have prepared before leaving their jobs. This type of problem arising out of ignorance and insensitivity to social structure can be addressed by educating the missionary on the significance of social structure to church planting.

1. If a missionary is to have a lasting impact among a people group not his own, he must identify social values and mores in the culture.

2. Accurate perception of one's receptors is based on one's understanding of their social world views. The common mistake church planters make is to assume what and how people are. We perceive people as we have been told. Knowing the social context, the people themselves would help us to gain a more accurate understanding of their ways. For example:

A man came to visit a missionary on the mission station. The missionary was at the table with his family when the man came in. He was asked to sit in the living room until they finished eating in the dining room. He began to ponder why the missionaries behaved in such a way toward him. Culturally, the missionaries should have asked him to join them at the table. And in response, he is customarily expected to refuse the invitation since he did not come there to eat. If he refuses, to eat, the missionaries are expected to persuade him to eat.

By ignoring cultural parameters, the missionaries lost the trust of this man, who mis-interpreted their behaviour and took offence at their rejection. And because they were ignorant of the cultural practice, they assumed his mealtime visit was purposefully to beg food from them. Misunderstanding beginning at this level are exemplary of the rift in communication that occurs without the necessary foundation of acculturation.

3. Indigenous leadership patterns must relate to their social context. Organising believers into a local congregation necessitates the selection and appointment of leaders. The steps taken to install a culturally and biblically based leadership must be in agreement with the practices of one's receptors.

4. Issues of discipleship and theological agenda ought to be issues which are of significant interest and concern to the people. Training and curriculum must be contextualised; systematic theology also must in content address issues of the people in their social context.

5. The application of the message (Gospel) depends largely on an understanding of the receptors. Therefore, understanding social context factor is as important as the message and communication methods. Church planters ought to spend a considerable amount of time studying the social context in which they serve. This will greatly improve their understanding of the appropriate cultural communication methods as well as how to apply the gospel message. Even national believers serving cross-culturally may fall into the same snare.

For instance, the case below was the writer's experience:

When I was a sophomore in college, a young man came as a freshman to the college. He had previously lived in the

United States for about four years. He was a very nice young man but had just returned to Nigeria and had forgotten some of the cultural expectations. Once, when he was eating, he asked some of the students, "You wanna eat?" The students responded that they did not, and the Americanised student accepted their response without question. It was not until later that he discovered why they had turned him down. First, he used American slang when he spoke to them. To the students, he was trying to show off that he had been to America. Secondly, the students came from cultural backgrounds where it was wrong to ask whether somebody want to eat when one is eating. To these students, the custom is to say, "*Come and eat*" If they did not want to eat, they would have responded that they were satisfied or full. By asking whether they wanted to eat, it was taken to mean that they really desired to eat and that he was not really ready to share food with them. In this case, the student relearned the proper cultural responses.

These examples show that people are not discriminating on the basis of one's race but, rather, the foreign element exhibited through practices, life styles, and personal and interpersonal communication.

What a church planter says is important. Equally important are nonverbal communication styles. The case below shows how the lifestyle of a church planter may speak louder than his voice.

Summer missionaries from the United States of America came to one mission to work. They were well received by the church and community. A few days after their arrival, some of the women were seen wearing slacks. They were also repeatedly seen with the male teammates engaging in behaviours such as hugging and sitting on each other's laps. In the afternoon the women changed to shorts and sleeveless T-shirts in order to get suntan. The nationals saw them in all these acts, and were surprised by the appearance of immorality among those who came to preach the gospel.

It is important that the church planter be conscious of his actions before his receptors. The impression one leaves with

national believers may be different from the intentions of the church planter. This is because of the differences in their cultural backgrounds. It is for this reason that efforts should be made by the the church planter to relate and identify with his receptors in order to minimise such differences and potential conflicts.

### **Social structure is foundational to contextualisation of the message and the messenger**

Contextualisation is the process of putting a message into appropriate language for the understanding of its receptor. In relation to the gospel and theology, it is the process by which the recipients of the gospel and theology are brought into an understanding within their own context and setting. The issue of social context of the receptors is important because it has to do with people whose world views are diverse and changing within time. And because the receptors' form or method of communication is also diverse and changing, contextualisation becomes constant with the social context.

However, the content of the Gospel does not change. The form of its proclamation will change with developments in the social context and cultural communication method. While the arrangement of content of systematic theology is man-made or designed; and selected themes are based on issues of significant interest to its recipient, the Bible remains the final or ultimate source of biblical christian theology.

The purpose of this paper is to communicate how social structure undergrids the cross-cultural church planting. Receptivity, spiritual growth and development of the church depend on a proclamation that is sensitive to the social structure of the receptors of the gospel message. It identifies such social context issues that are significant for church planting and recommends their use by cross-cultural church planters for effective proclamation, discipleship and organisation.

The issues in social structures are issues of economics, structure of relationship, marriage and family, social activities, and hierarchies, kinship, political leadership, contemporary social changes and dynamics of the people.

Drawing on research of the Igala people of central Nigeria, this study sets the framework for enhancing ministry across cultural barriers. While most of the illustrations used may be limited to this culture, principles have been extracted to offer insight into social structure and the international church planting process.

Further, the examination of the Igala case analyses the implications of social structure for the national church planting process. It is my objective that the replication of these principles which were derived from the Igala case proved effective among other cross-cultural missionary settings. It is also my objective that this study serve as a tool to guide and spur God's messengers into a more fruitful ministry to people groups throughout the world.

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