

PROBLEMS AND PRESSURES FACING RURAL PASTORS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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Introduction

Perhaps the main root cause of, or one of the contributing factors to, the “ineffectiveness” of pastors in the village setting are the varied and complex clan and tribal customs, and problems, that come their way. Problems from within and without. From within, there is the pastor’s own surroundings, and family, and his congregation. From without, there is his extended family, clan or tribe, including non-Christians.

Pastors in rural villages live and work in their own cultural setting and environment. Thus, they are bound to be pressured from all sides. The community, in many ways, does not recognise, or view, the pastor as having a special and high calling to be apart, and separated unto God for a special task. No. They see him as one of their own, who should also fulfil his obligations to the infrastructure and well-being of the total community.

The pressures faced by the village pastor will be examined under three main headings:

- * family pressures;
- * tribal, clan, and cultural pressures; and
- * other attractions.

Family Pressures

The pastor is usually a family man. He has a wife, and a number of children. As such, he is under pressure to maintain the family. If he does not, then he is pressured by his wife, who may not be one who understands. Whereas, if the wife understands that her husband's calling is hers as well, then that helps ease the pressure.

There are two main issues that I would like to consider:

- (i) Housing – for the pastor of the village.
- (ii) Gardens (or means of sustainable livelihood) – for the pastor.

A third major issue, that is not considered here, is finance for the children's education.

(i) Housing

In discussing the problem of housing, or accommodation for the pastor and his family, there are two aspects to keep in focus.

- (a) The first, is the situation where a pastor agrees to serve elsewhere (among another clan or tribe).

- (b) The second, is the situation where the pastor is a native of the village he is serving.

(a) The “Foreigner” Pastor

In the area where my wife and I worked as “missionaries”, we saw how difficult it was for the “foreigner” pastor. This was in the “Star Mountains” area, where the Ok Tedi mine is located. The people we worked with are called the “Faiwol-Min”, which is also the language. We were not alone as “foreigner” pastors. Some of the other “foreigner” pastors we had serving here were from Telefomin and Oksapmin. Telefomin is not too far – it is an adjacent neighbour, with similar customs and traits, and just a slight change in sound and tone in the dialect.

I recall us posting one of these “import” pastors from where he had settled to another Faiwol village that was in dire need of a pastor. Yet, the receiving village was not prepared, and ready, for him. There was no house for him. When he arrived, he and his wife had to move in with a family in that village. The expectation was that he must build his own house.

Being an energetic middle-aged man, he set out to do just that. However, frustration after frustration came his way. The “church”, which was very nominal and worldly, and the people, as a whole, did not seem to support, and assist, their new pastor. Then also, the building materials, and resources, were not readily available. Remember, he is an outsider. He does not have land, and bush, and sago swamps,

from which to collect materials. No one was kind enough to permit him to derive such materials from their land and bush. No one helped him to build. So, the inevitable result was that he and his family repacked and left. They went back to the previous village, where they already had a house and gardens. In this sort of situation, there are two options open.

The first option is, as we have seen, he repacked his bags and left. The second option is for one to make a sacrificial commitment, out of a sense of call and love for the people, and to stay on, in spite of the conditions and circumstances. This kind of pastor suffers through it all “quietly and humbly”, because he has a big heart, and loves to serve his Lord and Master.

Some denominations are doing well, especially in regions where the church had been in existence for more than a 100 years (for example, many of the coastal regions and New Guinea islands). In these areas, one sees a very nice church building, as well as the pastor’s nice-looking high-covenant house nearby.

The consoling fact is that, by the time we left Faiwol, the people had woken up to their responsibility. Most of the villages had their old buildings, which were worn and torn, with leaking roofs, demolished. In their place, were nicer-looking iron-roof church buildings, and also good pastors’ houses.

(b) The Pastor Who is from His Own Village

As for the pastor who is from his own village, he should not have the same problems with “housing” – because he probably has a house of his own there already. But, the problem comes when his house gets old, and needs replacing. That is when he begins to concentrate on building his new house, and may neglect his pastoral duties. Sometimes the , takes the pastor two or three times longer to build. The longer he neglects the church, the more it suffers, and grows weak. So, the pastor is ineffective for these very reasons.

(ii) Gardens

Like housing, “gardens” are very important. They are the means whereby the general livelihood of the pastor is sustained. Sure, he would be aided, and given food. But this can only be as a temporary measure. There is certainly going to be a shortfall from that supplied by the village. He will have to draw from other sources as well. Therefore, the pastor spends a considerable amount of time making gardens. In fact, sometimes the pastor’s gardens were much, much bigger than the ordinary villagers’ gardens.

The problem is that he (the pastor) spends so much time worrying about, and making, his gardens that he does not perform, and do, his pastoral work properly and effectively. The time spent making gardens could be put to profitable use, taking or conducting Bible classes, preaching, teaching, and evangelising.

Tribal, Clan, and Cultural Pressures

Tribal, clan, and cultural pressures make a major contribution to the ineffectiveness of the pastor in a rural village setting. This is especially so for the pastor who is from the area he is serving. In saying this, I do not imply that a pastor from another culture is immune to these pressures and problems. He, too, will face, and be bombarded by, them. However, I want to suggest that, if he is a foreigner, with strong qualities, and character, and personality, and also strong Christian convictions, zeal, and devotion, he may be successful, and effective, to a certain degree.

Now, I may be biased. But I write with reflection on my “missionary” stint in the Faiwol-Min area of the Star Mountains. I have seen how true and genuine Christianity had affected, and influenced, cultural changes, or modifications. I will give some examples elsewhere.

For now, I want to address how kinship ties and obligations, in the life of a Melanesian pastor are a root cause for ineffectiveness. Part of a lyric of a secular song, by a singer named Rick Nelson, says: “No man is an island”. This is true for us all, but more so in Melanesia. Everybody relates to one another. In Melanesian society, kinship ties, or bonds, are very strong. As such, they are both ideal and burdensome. Ideal, because they benefit everyone concerned, in times of calamities – such as tribal war, accidents and injuries, in death and mourning, compensation, payback, and so on. Our modern terminology refers to this as the “wantok system” or “wantokism”. Or, in broad administrative, or business, routine, it is “who you know” that counts, and not what you know. So, outside of strict clan or kinship ties, we have this widespread situation. Thus, it is “who you know” that gets the job done.

Kinship ties and obligations can be burdensome, too. Because of the intricate infrastructural web of the system,

one gets entangled, and bogged down, in it. Everyone is obligated to one another. This leads to neglect, or procrastination, of one's immediate responsibilities, " 'cos one is concerned about squaring up one's debts". Narokobi puts it this way: "in a sense, Melanesian life is centred around obligations – giving and taking – leading to balance, and imbalance, and balance".¹ No one is debt-free or credit-free. You are forever obligated, either to any number of individuals, or to an entire clan group.

A pastor is no exception. In trying to serve his Master in his own village and clan (even in the next village, but within the circumference of the same tribal culture), the pastor easily gets sucked in, and entangles himself in that spider-like web that entwines our Melanesian society and context.

In any of the village or clan activities, in domestic social life circumstances, or even in trade exchanged (for a business-minded pastor), his involvement, and participation, is expected. He cannot be a "bystander". Being one of his own clansmen, he is aware of this expectation. And, if he shows signs of non-involvement, it will be communicated to him by his immediate next-of-kin or family.

Now, we may ask: "what does all this entail for a pastor?". Well, supposing there was a house-building project in the village, he (the pastor) is expected to throw in his lot and help. Or, if there is a "mortuary feast" in honour of a dead person in the village, he must participate. Similarly, with a marriage feast, and so on. The pastor is obliged to do so. If he fails to participate in such communal activities, everybody takes note of such failure. Then, when his time comes (for example, his present house deteriorates to an unusable condition, and he needs a new one), nobody might

¹ Bernard Narokobi, "Family Law in Melanesia", in *Catalyst* 18-1, p. 34.

turn up to give him a hand. The same applies for a garden project, or a village road/bridge project, etc.

Although “kinship ties” are very strong, yet favours are reciprocated, on the basis of what was rendered. Most villagers would, in a way, be related to the pastor. Yet, as an individual, he struggles to survive, and to make ends meet, if he strictly commits himself to his pastoral responsibilities. For this reason, he must be open, and strive to maintain his kinship ties. He is obligated to them, and they are obligated to him – the “give and take” aspect and mentality. You “give me”, “I give you”. You “help me” with my house/garden, I’ll “help you” with yours.

Kinship ties and obligations are not confined to the immediate village, and relatives, only. They apply also to the next neighbouring cluster of villages. Thus, the expansion of one’s network of “obligations”, and reciprocity (*dinaus*), occurs – the “give and take” system expands. Let me summarise by quoting once again from Narokobi’s writings: “In domestic life, as well as in trade and exchange, the principles of giving and taking are the same. If you receive, you must give. If you are not repaid, you are entitled to demand repayment by a private call, or through an intermediary, or though the raising of a public demand.”²

Other Sidetrack Attractions

There are a number of sidetrack attractions that also contribute to the ineffectiveness of the rural-village pastor. Each pastor has his own unique set of problems. Likewise, there are problems, common to all, or with just slight variations. We must note, too, that while we may allude to these aspects of their lives as “problems”, it may not be the way they, themselves, see these things. To them, these are legitimate means to better themselves, and to bring them to

² Ibid.

an equal par with others, or to improve their status and standing in the community. They would not recognise the negative effects these activities, or involvements, have on their pastoral roles.

(i) Politics, and Community Government

There are forms of lower level government, introduced by outsiders, who came to annex PNG, or, by those wanting to administer the land, under the auspices of the United Nations Charter. From the 1960s to about the mid- and late-1970s the local government councils system was quite an effective form of government. It replaced the old “Lulluai and Tultul” cum Paramount Chief. In some areas, younger men of quality and calibre were preferable to the older, traditional chiefs, or headmen, to be made the “councillor”.

Thus, in a number of cases in our church, or mission areas, some of our pastors were selected, above others, to become the village “councillor”. Would this be good, and healthy, for the church, or not? Some would argue for, and some against. I believe there are ways of becoming involved in the politics of the day, without severing our immediate responsibilities. But, sadly, often this is not the case.

When the pastor becomes involved in such politics, especially when becoming a “councillor”, his interests become divided. As a councillor, he would have the affairs of the village at heart (or, where there is a cluster of villages, with small populations, several villages would come under one councillor). This means a fair bit of travel, and perhaps weekends away. So, the pastor-councillor is not available to preach in his own church. Unless he had made prior

arrangements for an alternate preacher, the people would be denied the preaching of the word.

From these case studies [these were included as an appendix in the original document], we can see that the pastor's effectiveness lies in his commitment to his first, and foremost, calling: that of being the pastor. When he is caught up in this side attraction of politics, and gets really tangled up, he becomes ineffective. So, the best option is to take the direction the third pastor did (case study no. 3). You either resign from church work, or refuse full commitment, but be involved, and contribute indirectly to politics and community government.

(ii) Business Ventures

While the large majority of pastors are struggling to make ends meet, there are a few who show signs of wealth. In some villages, the pastor may be the wealthiest man. This is especially so where the leading trade-store belongs to none other than the pastor. Or, in some cases, because pastors are "trustworthy", they look after the village, or the "business groups", trade-store. Now, it may be that, out of the profits, they are given a small sum, as a "thank-you" token. Or, if he is not paid likewise, he is rewarded by other means (for example, if he has high-school age children, the "business group", or village trade-store, may be obliged to meet school fees). But this may raise objections, or other "shareholders" might demand the same assistance.

In some ways, it is good to see that there is confidence vested in the pastors by the community at large. And, generally, pastors do a good job as a "chairman", or as members of the Board of Directors of fairly large "business ventures". However, a fair bit

of time is spent attending “Board” meetings. This is not much different to key church leaders being involved in other committees and boards.

The problem is that pastors get busy attending meetings, and not giving the time and attention required for their immediate pastoral responsibilities.

(iii) Casual Labour/Job Opportunities

There are “mining company” and “sub-contractor” opportunities that companies offer as short-term casual labour and job opportunities. When the recruitment drive is on, pastors also volunteer their services; particularly if it is during the Christmas and New Year periods, when other workers go on furlough. This is considered a suitable time to earn some money for children’s school fees for the coming year.

If they don’t earn enough to cover the total costs of school fees, and other expenses as well, they will most probably return to work in the months of the first quarter of the year. These work assignments take pastors away from their family, and the church, or congregation. Again, the congregation suffers for lack of a pastor, who is present and putting a full effort into his work. And, if no suitable lay leadership is in place, it further weakens the fellowship.

Let me conclude this section by saying that I am all for having Christians involved in politics, business, and “tent-making” job opportunities. As Christians, we are to be the “salt and light” of the world. Therefore, try the best to be “that”. But, the problem is in finding the balance between being “salt and light” in the society, and being successful, and effective, and faithful, in the primary role of being the pastor. I am sure pastors can become “salt and light” without being too aloof from society. They can be of influence, with

maximum involvement, maintaining a balance, and avoiding getting entangled in the network of “obligations and reciprocity”.

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