

An excerpt from chapter 9 of Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach by Jane Vella

The Learners (p. 115):

A majority of Irish Jesuit priests and brothers, along with a sprinkling of other European nationals who were priests, brothers, or nuns, represented the missionary leadership of the Zambian church. A small number of Zambian priests, brothers and nuns rounded out the group.

The Activity (p. 118 ff.):

I described the simulated situation and asked them to do some simple learning tasks. "A new government has been elected in Zambia. It is staunchly determined to make all institutions fully Zambian. A law has been passed excluding all church men and women of American and European origin from Zambia. They must leave by the first of next month." I explained that we had a two-part task.

Task A is here and now. All those who will be sent home to the United States or Europe should gather in one group to decide: What will you do in the weeks remaining before you leave? How will you organize for your own personal future? (You can respond to these questions on the personal level.) What are your hopes for the Catholic Church in Zambia? (Offer these as a group.) All those whose origin is Zambian, form one group to decide: What will you personally do in the next few weeks to work for the necessary reorganization of parishes, dioceses, schools, colleges, hospitals, and seminaries of the Zambian Catholic Church? What are your hopes for the future? We will carry on this dialogue in small groups for one hour and then report to the entire group before going to Task B.

Task B is ten years later. You all meet in Rome. What do you think is happening in Zambia? What is happening for all of you who left Zambia ten years ago? Respond in the same small groups: those who have left (Europeans) and those who have stayed (Zambians). We will discuss your speculations in half an hour.

I sat by as an observer, a living video camera, trying to capture the immediate responses. The Zambian group, six men and six women, went at this task with gusto and lots of laughter. Indeed, their energy was so high that one had the fantastic thought that they had been anticipating this opportunity for some time. Their affect was clearly glad and a little bit scared.

The expatriate group, seven men and one woman, was subdued and confused. Their affect was clearly a mix of sad and mad. Voices were dark and murmuring. The one woman in the group kept trying to say something, but she was knitting all the while and sat at the margin of the group. She could not get the men in the group to hear her point. After a quarter of an hour, I went up to the group and pointed out to one Irish priest that Mary Anne was not "in" the group. He was surprised and said: "Oh, I see. Yes, yes, Mary Anne, what is it you want to say?" He had been entirely unconscious of her efforts at physical and verbal inclusion. Here was another symbol of a common lack of awareness.

The Zambian group got louder and louder, with more and more laughter and shouts of "Oh, yes! For sure!" They were working in their own language and the exuberance was felt across the room. The other group became pensive and quiet as the hour came to a close. I asked, "Who wants to share your findings?"

The Zambian group fell silent, waiting for the others to speak. A tall Irishman finally confessed that they were all feeling angry and sad about the law. For many of them, the first concern was how would they sell their cars? (This brought a physical sigh from the Zambian group and, I confess, a shocked expression from me.) Others in the expatriate group said they were all heading to Rome to meet the papal organizers of their respective orders and

would wait for the ban to be lifted, which they expected to occur soon. (Another palpable sigh was heard from the Zambians.) The Irish 'nun said she personally hoped for the best for the new Zambian church and would be cheering for them from wherever her order sent her. The men clearly did not share her optimism but said they were ready to return to help clean things up as soon as possible. My internal video camera was working apace, trying to get as much data as possible for the entire group to consider afterward.

The Zambians all began to talk at once. There was no end to their enthusiasm for this opportunity. There would be no hierarchy, they said. There would be no more building of churches. Seminaries would be closed. Young men interested in ministry would go to work with a priest in a parish to study, using a mentoring system. Women as well as men would run village parishes. Men and women in charge of parishes would work at other jobs to make their living. No funds would be accepted from Rome. Indeed, the Zambian church would send funds to Rome for use in needy situations around the world. Schools and hospitals would be self-sustaining through tuition and fees. There would be an annual conference of all Catholics to decide policy and processes. Zambian forms and symbols would be used in the sacraments.

When an Irish Jesuit interrupted with a sharp "Now hold on there!" a young Zambian priest turned to him with bright, angry eyes and a very sad voice. "When you were my professor in the seminary, didn't you know how you dominated us? Didn't you know how all Zambian forms and symbols were dishonored? Didn't you see how demoralized we were? How could you have been so blind?"

For the first time in my life I saw a priest cry. The Irish Jesuit came over, with great humility and tenderness, sobbing his sorrow and surprise: "Mikaeli, I swear to God, I never realized you felt like this." Soon the whole room was in tears. Simple forms of reconciliation were occurring everywhere, an embrace, a handshake, a rueful shake of the head, a smile. I raised my voice over the crowd and said, daringly, "This afternoon Father John omitted inviting us to the kiss of peace. It seems to me it is time for that now." The affective communication was profound.

After that small ceremony, I invited the two groups to set themselves to Task B. It is ten years later, and you are meeting in Rome. What's happening in Zambia? What's happening for all of you who left Zambia ten years ago? After half an hour, the speculation was exciting. The expatriates had all started working in other parts of Africa with a firm new perspective on their responsibilities to the principles of equality and cultural respect. It was obvious what they had learned. The Zambians shared their projection of times and new structures and emphasized their own need to avoid replicating what they had found so offensive in colonialism. They were realistic and more subdued in this projection task, but they nevertheless worked together with alacrity and hopefulness.