

The Cost of Unity By Duncan Olumbe

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Introduction

If you want to go fast, travel alone. If you want to go far, travel together. (African Proverb)

This week we've been looking at polycentric mission: from everywhere to everywhere. Underlying this is the call to unity. And though unity can sound easy, it is often hard work. Unity calls for leaders who are willing to pay the price as we serve fellow Christians in seeking to foster unity.

In John 17 we have Jesus' prayer for unity as the basic expression of our Christian faith. Jesus underscores the biblical foundational belief that unity is God's inherent nature. Thus, our unity reflects (dimly though) God's triune nature.

However, unity is not our human inherent nature. This is epitomized in the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics: nature tends towards a state of maximum entropy (chaos, disorder) not unity. Even with the best of intentions, we tend to gravitate towards chaos and disunity. It is therefore only by the grace of God and a commitment to live up to God's standards that we can begin to move towards the fulfilment of Jesus' prayer of unity.

In this session I will be drawing from my joys and pains of trying to bring unity in Kenyan mission scene (and beyond). I share from my heart the real cost of unity, the price that I, as leader must ready to pay, for the privilege of serving Christians to bring unity.

1. The Cost of Unity: Personal

I. Brokenness

At the base of the journey towards unity is a divine encounter with God which confronts us with the brokenness around us. Like in Nehemiah's journey to unite and lead God's people to rebuild Jerusalem, it all began with heart-breaking news of the ruined state of Jerusalem. (Neh. 1) The brokenness that accompanies disunity ought to tug at our hearts and start us on a journey towards unity. If indeed it is "good and pleasant when [we] brothers live together in unity" (Ps. 133), then the converse is true: disunity is awful and unpleasant. Unity is therefore not simply a pragmatic antidote to disunity but more deeply a redemptive journey into human brokenness – the Fall. The attendant manifestations of disunity – from the horrors of war to the dark shadows of fractured relationships – all echo the depth of our human brokenness so desperately in need of the redeeming grace of Christ.

My journey into pursuing missional unity was stirred by the sad realization of the absurd levels of disunity in Kenya and beyond. In a country with one of the highest evangelical populations (34%), Kenya has over 8000 registered denominations plus a similar number waiting for registration! The atrocious level of disunity borders on the comical – with some areas having over 50 churches within a square kilometre; all having blaring loudspeakers on a typical Sunday morning and struggling to listen to God as they outdo each other. This is coupled with the sad fact that despite Nairobi being the "Colorado Springs of Africa" in terms of the sheer number of Christian organizations located there, we largely have no idea who is doing mission, where and how! Basic information such as how many Kenyan cross-

cultural missionaries remain unknown and claims are left to individuals without any verification. But for now we seem to have rephrased Jesus' prayer: "[Father] May they be brought to complete [dis]unity to let the world know that you sent [our mission organizations]..." (John 17:23) Surely, through unity the Kenyan church could achieve much more.

Such brokenness ought to stir our hearts towards crying for and doing something towards tangible unity. As leaders, we have to be ready to pay the price of having our hearts ripped apart by the pain caused by disunity around us. Unlike Jonah, we cannot afford to be asleep in our comfort zones ignoring the pains. God awakens our hearts to a deep passion for Christian unity that leads to prayers and a commitment to do something like Nehemiah. Maybe for some of us, unity would mean being rendered jobless. Are we ready to pay such a price?

II. Motives

Even where there is a deep passion for unity, one of the subtle challenges we soon face is how to discern the motives (personal or organizational) beneath all the talk about unity. What is the primary driver for our push towards unity?

Whereas a variety of motivators for mission exist and their validity can be argued (reaching the lost, finishing the task, going where Christ is not known, loving the unlovable, etc.), we desperately need to place our motives in front of the mirror of God's word. Is it survival, competition, power and control, building a name for ourselves or God's kingdom?

It is sometimes shocking how we can perfect the art of hiding our (evil) motives under spiritual veneer. It is the fallenness of human heart. Stories abound of "mergers" which are essentially "take-overs", partnerships where some partners are reduced to "flower girls" or "page boys" in the wedding, networks that are essentially "marketing tools" for particular individual organizations, etc.

As leaders, we are being called to lay bare our hearts before Him whom nothing is hidden (Heb. 4:13). I am learning to constantly pray: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (Ps. 139:23-24) Unfortunately, the tyranny of the urgent forces on most of us a busy lifestyle which is devoid of the much-needed disciplines of regular meditation and reflection to re-calibrate our motives to the "True North" of godliness. Authentic unity demands that we pay the price of "love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." (1 Tim. 1:5) nurtured through regular introspection, mutual confessions when we wander off and vulnerable accountability to have our inner motives interrogated.

III. Attitudes

Perhaps at the root our motives are deeply embedded attitudes. Healthy attitudes such as joy, humility, etc. are such a great balm to the tortuous journey of unity. However, unhealthy attitudes such as pride, jealousy, contempt, superiority or inferiority, negativity, etc. are a huge drain to unity.

The challenge is that attitudes are largely reinforced and affirmed through repeated acceptable patterns in our personal and/or organizational journeys. Depending on these patterns, unhealthy attitudes can easily creep in and become part and parcel of our identities. Soon they epitomize the reality that "birds of a feather flock together" and lead to the formation of floating bands of deeply corrosive gripe and negativity wherever we go. Welcome to the "Wailing Wall" bands in missions.

At some point in my own journey I have had to confront a deeply negative and critical attitude (spirit) which saw nothing good in the other. Instead of excusing it as a personality bent, I am slowly learning that "The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit." (Prov. 15:1) Similarly I am reflecting afresh on Paul's exhortations: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." (Phil 2:5) and "...whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is

pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.” (Phil. 4:8)

I have also observed debilitating attitudes especially of pride, contempt and superiority from some of those who appear powerful and largely successful. This is not a preserve of only Global North colleagues and organizations; it seems to infect any person/organization who/which is powerful be they Koreans, Kenyans or Nigerians or Brazilians. They run roughshod over anything they consider “inferior” in any way. A classic example is that of a global organization which imported their “quality” beds and mattresses, pens, etc. plus volunteers to a global conference which they were organizing in another country! They totally ignored the local church in the host country while talking of being united. May God save us from ourselves!

On the other hand I have also seen crippling inferiority and boot-licking attitudes from those who perceive themselves to be less endowed. This is especially so for some of my own African brothers and sisters who have been or have reduced themselves to invisible/inconsequential partners in God’s mission due to serious identity crisis. Emerging from such deeply disturbing attitudes is the philosophy that whatever is from the “West is Best” or “East is Excellent” and must be received without any questions. Whether in theological education curricula, organizational governance or theological reflections, this ends up spawning endless cycles of generational dependencies and subservience masquerading as humility and graciousness.

As leaders we are being called to meet the cost of nurturing healthy godly attitudes which are so critical for any credible unity. And we have to pay the price of confronting our established patterns of attitudes which hinder authentic unity. This is particularly more critical where such unhealthy patterns are reinforced by our cultures and positions. For example, the brutally straightforward Dutch in a position of power has to learn to temper that with love and sensitivity when working with Asians. Similarly the ever-acquiescing African leader in a receiving position has to learn to honestly say No to demeaning relationship with Westerners. Likewise the effervescent, ever-warm Latino has to learn to back off a little and give a glimpse into their true emotions when dealing with our stoic Eastern Europeans or “impossible to read” Japanese. This calls for greater commitment to cultural intelligence through a process of life-long learning.

2. The Cost of Unity: Interpersonal

I. Conflict Management

Whenever people and organizations come together, it is inevitable to have conflict. Team dynamics, personality clashes, misunderstandings, etc. are common causes. As such, conflict management is vital for our unity. Unfortunately it seems that years of political correctness has led us to swing to the extreme where abrasive, corrosive and caustic leadership is increasingly celebrated even in Christian circles. Furthermore, it would appear that in world full of hard tackles, organizations are consciously looking for tough, rough leaders. The level of abrasiveness – in emails, public press statements, etc. – is increasingly shocking. Vicious boardroom wars, which occasionally become public, underscore poor or even non-existent conflict management skills and/or systems. And it seems that for a growing number of us, we enjoy such “bull fights” and sometimes even go ahead to fuel them by waving “red scarves” in front of our prized and already infuriated “bulls”! The uglier the fight the greater the “entertainment” and the sweeter the “victory”. All these deeply undermine our unity.

As leaders we are called to pay the price embracing the biblical model of conflict resolution. Jesus entreats us to a godly staggered process (Mat. 18:15-17). In this journey I am rediscovering what it means: “Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the sons of God.” (Mat. 5:9). I have to resist the temptation to corrupt this to: “Blessed are the trouble makers for they shall become our leaders/heroes.” Instead of pitching for a fight, like an infuriated “bull”, I am learning the joy of not insisting to win a battle but lose the war. I have come to appreciate that there is “a time to be silent and

a time to speak...a time for war and a time for peace.” (Ecc. 3:8b, 9b) I am learning that often a number of such abrasive fights are not worth my time or effort. If anything, I have recently enjoyed the sheer peace of “lying low like an envelope”; operating below the radar and minding my own business. “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” (Rom. 12:18)

II. Forgiveness & Reconciliation

In the journey towards unity, we do well to celebrate the positive experiences of unity. But also engage the not-so-pleasant experiences we’ve had. Some of the most difficult to face are betrayal, backstabbing, etc. especially from those we trusted. The result is often bitterness, suspicion and lack of joy and trust.

In the face of such deep heartaches, we need to ask: What does it mean to forgive seventy times seven? (Mat. 18:22) Or to turn the other cheek? (Mat. 5:39) To ensure that the sun does not set on our anger? (Eph. 4:26) How can I say I love God that I cannot see and hate my sister or brother that I can see? (1 John 4:20) We have to remember that Jesus was betrayed and denied by those closest to him – Judas & Peter.

I strongly believe that God might be calling some of us in this room who are not in talking terms to leave the sacrifice at the altar, walk across the room and extend or ask for forgiveness. (Mat. 5:24) We do well to harken to Paul’s plea to Euodia and Syntyche “to agree with each other in the Lord.” (Phil. 4:2-3) For how many years are we going to carry the burden of ruptured relationships in our mission communities? Maybe between WEA MC and Lausanne? WCC or the Catholics? Between Global North and Global South? We desperately need to climb down our moral pedestals (like the Pharisee) and instead beat our breast like the tax collector: “God have mercy on me, a sinner.” (Lk. 18:9-14)

III. Power and Control

The challenge of power and control in our journey towards biblical unity is perhaps the most complex in our generation. Maybe this should not surprise us; it was really at the root of the Fall. Adam and Eve were deceived on the promise that in eating the fruit God had forbade them, they would be like God – all-knowing and all-powerful. (Gen. 3:4) Since then our human history has been characterised by the quest for power and control. Sometimes with catastrophic results like in wars. And almost all the times with deeply fractured relationships – with God, fellow humans and creation at large.

One of the more visible aspects of this struggle, which has already been addressed by several of the speakers before me, is the power play between the fiscal and the numerical centres of Christianity (Global North/East vs. Global South). Sadly this has confirmed the adage: “She who pays the piper calls the tune”. Whether in the more blatant control of access to theological “halls of fame” or in the more subtle power balances in networks and alliances, we continue to perpetuate the notion that mission is from the powerful to the powerless.

But I have come to realize that the allure of power and control is not a preserve of the Global North/East. Even Global South leaders enjoy and perpetuate it within their spheres of influence. We therefore have “Gatekeepers” who firmly believe you cannot, for example reach their African constituencies unless you go through them. Not to mention some of the most abusive (emotional and spiritual), manipulative and insidious leadership that is celebrated on the global platform but feared like the Mafia at home. Some of these leaders are willing to do anything (including killing their perceived opponents) to cling to their grandiose powers. The resultant cost of maintaining such fattened leadership in the Global South is astronomical. And to think that this is in a context of extreme poverty is scandalous at the very least or abominable at its core.

I have come to believe that the insatiable hunger for power and control is a fact of our human fallenness. As a leader I am therefore being called to pay the price of rejecting this by not confirming “any longer to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. Then you will be able to approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.” (Rom. 12:2)

Other related issues in this theme include the way we engage systemic patterns that affect the minorities in our various contexts. Racial, gender and age discriminations are just a few. The conflict between Hebraic and Hellenistic Jewish widows demonstrated one such case (Acts 6:1-7). It is commendable the way the leaders (apostles) dealt with it: addressing the issue & delegation of duties. In fact the selection of the deacons who were largely Gentiles demonstrated the principle of “thinking of the other” and perhaps sought to address any lingering perceptions of bias.

Perceptions are deeply significant whether real or imagined. And they come alive especially in times of crisis when confronted by what appears to confirm our fears. Peter’s hidden racial and religious prejudices are revealed when confronted with eating the “unclean” food (Acts 10:9-22) or eating with Gentiles (Galatians 2:11-21).

I am learning as a leader to be alive to my perceptions about power and control which so easily clouds my interpretation of realities. How do I react in a godly way? For example, when I am routinely stopped “randomly” at airports across the world, I chose to maintain my cool but if an opportunity arises, I address it with the official in a respectful and even humorous way.

Similarly I need to be alive to the perceptions that my actions could trigger in others. This therefore demands that I try not to do things that reinforce the perceptions. For our North American colleagues here, I believe the issue of the lack of African Americans in the mission roundtable needs serious attention. And for the wider evangelical mission fraternity, the place of women in our midst and that of the younger generation need urgent attention too beyond mere rhetoric.

The challenge though is that sometimes we are not even aware of these perceptions in our journey towards unity. I believe we need honest dialogue and openness to the Holy Spirit to shine his light on some of these hidden realities.

3. The Cost of Unity: The Higher Path

However, we have to humbly admit that even the most culturally adept among us is fallen and will inevitably make mistakes. As such we need the higher path as we hearken to Peter’s advice: “Above all, love each other deeply because love covers over a multitude of sins.” (1 Peter 4:8) Indeed we have to be constantly reminded that without love, all our most noble sacrifices are meaningless.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no records of wrong. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. (1 Cor. 13:4-8a)

In the high-pressure cooker that is mission leadership, I am having to rediscover afresh what it means to love others. I find it especially difficult to extend love to those I don’t like; it is often easier to practice diplomatic politeness or discrete avoidance or even outright disdain. But if I am to take up the cross and follow Jesus (Mt. 16:24) then I must daily allow the Holy Spirit to bathe my heart with God’s unconditional love which melts my bruised hardened heart to love others irrespective. Even when I feel justifiably more righteous, I must take care that I do not become like the older brother to the prodigal son. (Lk. 15:28-32)

Conclusion

Lord Jesus, help me, help us, to daily take up my/our cross and follow you in this journey towards unity. Forgive my/our failures which have served to hinder godly unity. Steady our hands and feet as we journey this rugged path of the Cross. And in the prayer of St. Francis Assisi:

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace!
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light.
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,
Grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console.
To be understood as to understand.
To be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive.
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.
It is in dying
that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.

Reflections:

1. What are some of the brokenness in our relationships that we can identify in our contexts? How can our hearts be stirred up to cry for unity and restoration in such situations?
2. Which are some of the hidden motives that you have had to confront in your own life as a leader? What have you found helpful in dealing with such deeply personal matters?
3. What attitudes are you currently struggling with while dealing with people from other cultures? Any practical steps you are taking or can take to address these attitudes?
4. In what ways might we be encouraging “bull fights” in our leadership styles? How can we model a leadership style full of grace in the face of extreme provocation?
5. Gently explore any long-standing cases of heartaches and unforgiveness in your mission context. What might it look like to “leave the sacrifice at the altar and go seek reconciliation”?
6. What are some of the power and control issues we are facing in our mission unity efforts? What might be some of the hidden perceptions that we might not be aware of?
7. How can we flesh out what it means to leave each other deeply?