

Establishing Indigenous Church Leadership: Lessons and Reflections from the South Pacific

By Wayne Chen

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After four challenging years of learning two new languages and gaining a deep understanding of tribal animistic worldviews, followed by a summer dedicated to presenting the gospel chronologically from Genesis to the cross, our team found itself standing before a group of 15 first-generation believers. They had placed their faith in Jesus, whom they knew as the “road man” who took their place on the cross.¹ They were bravely stepping away from their ancestral beliefs, and now, as a new community of faith, they looked at each other with curiosity.

True conversion had finally occurred! Could we pat ourselves on the back and relax, celebrating a job well done? Was this truly the reason we

1 The language of the people group does not have words for “savior,” “forgiveness,” “grace,” or “sin.” In our chronological approach of presenting the salvation narrative, Jesus was introduced as the “road man,” or the one who was to come, the one promised in Genesis 3 who would restore our relationship with God.

had left our home countries to move into the jungle in the South Pacific? Or was there more to it?

Amid the joy of witnessing the gospel bear fruit, my teammates and I shared a sinking feeling: What comes next? How do we guide this group of believers toward establishing a healthy, indigenous church?

There are many resources, books, models, and training materials for multiplying the first group of believers, but very few provide roadmaps to eventually establishing mature indigenous churches in cross-cultural contexts. Post-evangelism church planting and discipleship resources are much scarcer compared to evangelism models.

From 2009 to 2017, I had the privilege of serving with two other families in a remote tribal group in the South Pacific. Our people group epitomized syncretistic animism, lacking a mother-tongue Bible translation and any prior exposure to the Gospel. The purpose of this article is to outline our strategies for church planting post-evangelism and our approach to developing indigenous leadership.

The Nonnegotiable Goal of Establishing Indigenous Ownership: Seeing Their Story in God's Metanarrative

Our goal was clear: to plant a church that would thrive long after the missionaries had gone. Despite our affection for these new believers, we knew they were not yet a cohesive body. They came from various clans within the village, each with its own history and conflicts. Some harbored suspicions towards one another, and a few had long-standing tribal disputes. Moreover, they all faced persecution from their animistic community and family members. Their only common ground was their newly found faith in Christ.

Naturally, the next phase of our ministry would be the formation of a local church. Our supporters back home eagerly awaited the news of the

momentous event of the first church gathering of these new believers. However, Sundays came and passed without any such gathering. Instead, the believers continued their usual activities—fishing, gardening, smoking, and chewing betel nut.

We knew that if we, the missionaries, had instructed them to gather for worship, they would have complied. We could have taken a celebratory photograph, proclaiming the birth of a new church. But our team made a strategic decision, that we would not verbally tell them to gather as a church.

Previous missionary efforts in the South Pacific had often resulted in transient churches that faded away once the missionaries left. Had we asked them to gather, the new believers would have gladly done so. But we risked the very likelihood of the church being perceived both internally within the body and externally in the unbelieving community, as “the church that missionaries planted.” We were determined to avoid this label. Instead, we told them, “The Bible does not end at the cross and resurrection of Christ. There is another book that records the story of people just like you—first-generation believers—and how they followed and lived out their faith. We are willing to tell you that story.”

For the next two months, we led the believers through the book of Acts during weekday teaching sessions. There was still no church gathering on Sundays simply because we never told them to do it. But as we carefully taught each chapter, the believers began to notice the communal gatherings described in Acts 2 and 4. They started to ask, “God’s people in the Bible began meeting together. Should we start meeting as well?” Understanding their tendency to rely on missionaries for decisions, we responded, “What do you think you should do?” without making the decision for them.

Finally, one day, a brother approached us, and with frustration he said, “If you missionaries don’t tell us to start meeting, we will start meeting ourselves!” We smiled and replied, “Go for it. Just let us know

where you will meet, and we'll join you." Three months after the gospel presentation, the church officially began gathering. On that first Sunday, none of the believers knew what to do, so the missionaries temporarily functioned as elders.

Fifteen years later, no one in the church identifies it as "the church the missionaries started." Instead, its identity is deeply rooted in the biblical narrative: "We saw what God's people did in the book of Acts, so we are doing it too."

It is worth noting that our team did not employ a Socratic model of self-discovery or simply facilitated the reading of Acts. We taught through the book of Acts intentionally, in detail, with the aim of helping these believers see their story in the history of the early church in the biblical meta-narrative.

Biblical Paternalism Versus Colonialist Paternalism

I remember visiting an established town church (planted by missionaries) as a brand new worker on the field. The ratio of national believers to foreign faces was about 40:1. Much to my surprise, the entire service was missionary-led. To top it off, another missionary who attended as a visitor was asked to give the benediction! It was clear that the national believers had come to expect that missionaries would always lead, and they would always follow. I made a mental note to never repeat this mistake.

Many of the church-planting "methods" encourage the missionaries to refrain from teaching but only to facilitate instead. Our team discussed the balance between the role of teaching and the need to facilitate. We concluded that pitting teaching and facilitating against each other creates an unhealthy dichotomy. Good teachers will always facilitate, but facilitation should not replace the role of intentional teaching. Finding a balance in a young church is hard, but worth the effort.

Immediately after the church started formally meeting, the three husbands on our team became the shepherd-elders of the infant church, not in title but in function. (The local elders appointed later are still known today as the “first elders” of this church, not the missionaries.) We led weekday Bible studies, taught on Sundays, checked up on individuals and families, and continued with the New Testament translation. Were we being colonial in taking on this leadership function? I sure hope not. Were we being paternalistic? Absolutely. To provide the necessary guidance and allow indigenous believers to take ownership of their faith community, we need not be afraid to model a biblical paternalism characterized by nurturing and mentoring (1 Cor. 4:14–16; Heb. 12:5–11).

In the 18 months following the proclamation of the gospel, although the missionaries initially assumed leadership roles, we were very intentional in training and empowering the national believers.

- 1. Addressing Sin Among Believers:** Anytime a believer fell into sin such as drunkenness, domestic violence, or theft; the missionaries responded promptly. However, we always brought along one or two other believers. This approach aimed to communicate the seriousness of sin within the church community while modeling how to confront sin with gentleness, grace, directness, and intentionality.
- 2. Group Discipleship:** After the first six months, our team made a point not to conduct long discipleship sessions with just a single believer. Instead, other believers were always invited in small groups. This not only fostered a sense of community and shared growth but removed the missionaries from always being the “go-to” people in the life of the church.
- 3. Inclusive Lesson Preparation:** The missionaries also opened our lesson preparation time to all believers. When preparing for a Sunday message, we rarely did so alone. A group of believers was invited to study the Scripture and draft the message outline with me. The believers were asked to contribute illustrations and

applications of the passage from their context. This collaborative process significantly increased preparation time—from a three-hour personal study to a 20-hour group effort. However, our goal was to model the entire process of engaging with Scripture, from beginning to end, alongside the tribal believers.

4. **Shared Teaching Responsibilities:** While the missionaries initially taught most of the lessons in our Sunday gatherings, we quickly involved the believers in teaching alongside us. They began by addressing single points or short passages from the text. By the end of the second year, the believers had completely taken over the teaching responsibilities.

To summarize this early season, we followed a deliberate process in almost everything thing we did:

1. **Modeling and Teaching:** The missionaries modeled and taught.
2. **Shouldering Responsibilities:** National believers were invited to come alongside the missionaries and shoulder responsibilities.
3. **Gradual Withdrawal:** The missionaries intentionally retreated to the background, allowing the national believers to take on full responsibilities.

Discipleship needs to be shown, not just taught. Infant churches in cross-cultural contexts need to see a model so they can imitate. Intentionally demonstrating a biblical model so that new believers can follow is not colonialism.

Effective modeling from missionary teams to infant churches is essential in post-gospel ministry. This approach leads to a deeper understanding of biblical truths and a growing desire to apply those truths to all aspects of personal and church life. However, colonialist modeling removes the impetus to think critically, leaving the infant church with rigid forms of “doing church” without understanding the underlying reasons. Most unreached people groups today have had some prior exposure to Christian forms of worship and religious activities,

whether in person or via the internet and media. Therefore, it is crucial for church-planting teams to not only focus on language and culture, but also conduct a careful study of the Christian forms and practices in the broader context surrounding their target people group.

In Papua New Guinea towns, it is not uncommon to see professing Christians walking under the scorching equatorial sun in long pants and sparkling white shirts on Sundays. In our tribal context, most villagers own only two or three t-shirts and shorts, and most children are not fully clothed until they are older. On our first Sunday gathering, our team decided to wear our normal, everyday clothes, including flip-flops and cut-off t-shirts. By the end of the day, the whole village, including those outside the church, were discussing our attire and how different we appeared compared to the churchgoers they had seen in towns. Some villagers even accused us of being false prophets because we did not look like proper Western missionaries. We then sat down with the believers and explained to them why we chose to dress the way we did. Our decision was based not merely on local culture but, more importantly, on the biblical truth that God judges the heart and not outward appearances (1 Sam. 16:7; John 7:24), as well as cementing a grace-based gospel. Compare and contrast, teach and model, train and empower, release and support—these were our aims during this season.

The central responsibility of teaching and preaching, where one carefully studies the Scriptures, highlights the gospel, and applies the text to our lives, requires intentional modeling. The infant church will naturally look for models. Missionary teams must avoid assuming a vacuum in the post-conversion season in which the church would organically mature on its own without models. The larger social, religious, and cultural contexts offer ample examples of how a particular teacher instructs, behaves, and esteems himself—and not all are biblical. Our team labored through this season, knowing it needed to be short to avoid dependency, but effective in modeling the ministry of teaching and preaching biblically.

By the beginning of the third year, we had phased ourselves out of the main teaching ministries. This approach ensured that the local believers were gradually prepared to lead their church independently, fostering a sustainable and culturally relevant faith community.

Valuing Faithfulness over Personal Gifting

Raising up indigenous leadership was front and center on our minds from the very beginning. We knew those 18 months of taking on church leadership needed to be an intentional but short season. The last thing we wanted was for the church to get comfortable and come to expect the missionaries to do the work.

The first question we faced was that of “selection”—whom do we pick as future leaders? What are the qualifications? How do we choose future elders at a time when nobody in the church is qualified according to 1 Timothy 3?

The first time we asked the church who wanted to be trained as an elder, everybody and their dogs raised their hands! Motives varied; some wanted positions in this new faith community, a few thought missionaries would start paying cash for this new job, and most did not understand the magnitude of the ministry of being an elder. In leadership training, missionaries often make the mistake of picking the most educated, or ones with the highest English fluency or most personal gifting. In the beginning of the book of Acts, the embryonic church faced the same question: whom do we pick to replace Judas? Instead of personal gifting, they landed on faithfulness (Acts 1:21–22). Who has been with us from the very beginning? Who has walked with us? Those first 18 months gave our team a glimpse of not just who is gifted but who is faithful? Who has been faithfully attending not just Sunday gatherings but also investing time to come to the Friday night fellowship? Who has been faithful in not just listening to the missionaries but also bringing the message back to share with his unbelieving family? Who is not only spending time with the

missionaries but also hanging out with fellow believers? We did not want the most gifted; we wanted the most faithful.

With this standard, we asked nine men to start an “elder training group.” At the moment of selection, none of them qualified biblically. Half of the group had unbelieving spouses, and a few still struggled with anger issues and drunkenness. What they had in common was their solid understanding of the gospel, evidence of a regenerated life with fruits, and consistent faithfulness as believers. These nine believers had shown commitment not just to the missionaries or church ministries, but most importantly, to each other and the rest of the believing body. Missionaries sometimes confuse faithfulness “to the missionaries” with faithfulness “to the entire faith community.” Our goal is to identify believers who are not merely following the missionaries’ words but are also deeply committed to their fellow believers, actively practicing the “one another” passages from Scripture. It is important to consider: Do they engage with and submit to their fellow believers, or do they only heed the missionaries’ voices?

We then made an announcement to the church that from that point on, we (the missionaries) would set aside Monday nights for these nine men. It would be a closed meeting, just for this group of believers, for the sake of leadership training.

The second question we faced was about “content”: how do we train these new leaders?

At our first meeting, twelve people showed up. The concept of a closed meeting for a select few was new to the church. Some were suspicious, thinking the elder training group might receive special benefits from the missionaries. Others felt they should have been included. We gently explained that this was indeed a closed meeting and meant for specific training.

We spent the rest of the evening delving deep into four key areas:

1. **Our Personal Walk with God:** We began by discussing our personal spiritual journeys. Questions like “What has the Lord been teaching you lately?” and “What sins are you struggling with?” were common. Each meeting started with a short devotion led by one of the national believers, followed by open sharing. Even the missionaries shared their struggles and sins, which was a new concept for the believers, as leaders in their culture rarely show vulnerability.
2. **Family Life: Marriage and Parenting:** We believe that the first place a new believer should apply his faith is within his family. We asked questions like, “Have you shared the gospel with your spouse? How did you respond when they rejected it? Are your children obeying you? Are you modeling biblically what a father’s role is in the family?”
3. **Our Relationships with Each Other:** This was about putting the “one another” passages of the New Testament into practice. Our believers came with baggage—some from different clans with historical conflicts, others with personal or family disputes. Some among the group have disagreed over some decisions in the church. The huge benefit of having a missionary team (three families) is that we were able to openly share about our team relationships. There were times where I had to apologize to my teammates, and we made a point to let the elder training group know how we also had to work through issues of unity and reconciliation.
4. **Ministries in the Church:** We intentionally placed this last to highlight the importance of personal and family life first. We guided the group through church decision-making processes and ministry plans, assigning responsibilities and discussing newcomers. We ended each meeting with prayer.

Word quickly spread that our Monday evening meetings were intense, focusing on deep discipleship that uncovered hidden sins and areas needing growth. The rest of the church began to respect the intention-

ality of these meetings and stopped trying to join them. These sessions often extended well past midnight, filled with laughter, tears, awkward silences, breakthroughs, repentance, and renewed walks in Christ.

This training group met on Mondays for over three years. During that time, the missionaries still functioned as church elders, but the brothers began to take on elder responsibilities in teaching, discipling, correcting, and planning. All except two of the brothers' wives came to faith during this period. We always valued faithfulness over personal gifting.

The last question was, "When?" When do we officially appoint indigenous leadership before the congregation? By the end of the third year after the birth of the church, it was clear to the team that the time to appoint indigenous leadership had come. The church had grown from 20 to about 80 believers. The men in the elder training group had taken on the role to lead and shepherd the church. Sunday messages and community outreach had been completely put in the hands of the believers.

Five of the brothers in the group had shown sustained faithfulness in their personal walk with the Lord as well as commitment to the body. So, we put these five men and their wives before the church and announced that we were ready to appoint these men as elders of the church. We also told the church that if anybody had any concerns about these candidates, they were free to come to us and share those concerns.

Much to our surprise, for the next two weeks, almost everybody from the church came to us and voiced various concerns about why these men ought not to be appointed. Did we miss something? Did these men lead a double life in an alternate universe?

We received all the input and investigated it thoroughly. None of the concerns were enough to disqualify any of the men biblically; rather, they were areas of growth that any believer would need in their process of sanctification. Then we realized the situation: those men were ready to lead as elders, but the rest of the church was not ready to follow them.

We thanked the church for their input and called off the elder appointment. The five men humbly accepted the outcome. We simply asked the elder-training group to devote more time to the rest of the body and continue to do what they had been doing, with more intentionality and humility. About six months later, we put the men before the church again and asked for feedback. Very few concerns surfaced this time, and they were appointed as the first five elders of the church.

Team Strategy Post-“Elder Appointment”

As the elders began to function in the church, our team quickly realized that our presence as missionaries might eventually hinder the full transition to local church leadership. Church members often still sought direction from the missionaries instead of their own elders. Recognizing this, we began to implement our exit plan.

About a year after the elder appointment, our team bid farewell to the church and adopted an itinerant approach. Since then, we have made regular visits back to the church but have never stayed for more than two weeks at a time. The church is now going on eight years after we ended our local residence.

Post-missionary Season and the Church’s Current State

In 2022, I made a trip back to visit the church and had the opportunity to sit down with two of the elders. I asked them how the church was doing five years after the missionaries had left and requested them to reflect on the time when our team moved out. Here’s what they shared:

Elder 1: When the missionaries told us they were leaving, I started thinking, “Can we really do the elder work?” We are the church elders, but we felt like the missionaries should keep on helping us.

Elder 2: *When those outside the church started talking behind our backs, we felt afraid at times. Can we really stand firm after the missionaries leave? We really did have those thoughts. When the unbelievers saw that the missionaries had really left, they said, "This is over for the Christians. The church will close now." They think only the missionaries have real knowledge. People like us aren't smart enough; only the missionaries know how to look after the church. So, they thought as soon as the missionaries leave, we are done. But God helped us and gave us His wisdom. So, when the missionaries left, we actually became stronger, as if we grew up all of a sudden. We started working ourselves and saw the church grow. When the missionaries were still here, it was like we were hanging on to them. But when they left and we started doing things ourselves, God gave us His wisdom and strength.*

Elder 2: *Honestly, now we don't really miss the missionaries too much. They leave or come back; it doesn't matter. We will just keep on serving with God's strength. This is really how we saw the strength of the church.*

Elder 1: *When the missionaries moved in and shared the gospel with us, only a small group of us believed in the gospel. But when the missionaries left, God's church continued to grow and stand firm. And because of this, when we were by ourselves, more people believed the gospel and joined the church. This shows that the church is alive and growing.*

I am finishing this article in the capital city of Papua New Guinea. In about 48 hours, I will be hopping on a 23-foot dinghy and navigating 150 km of open ocean to again return to the village and visit the church.

The church is now discipling its third generation of believers. Eight years after the elder appointment, three of the five elders are still faithfully serving. One has retired due to old age, and another received church discipline due to unrepentant sin but remains part of the church body. The Monday evening meetings have continued as a weekly elders' gathering. They have also begun to train two more young elder candidates.

Learning new languages and worldviews was hard but discipling a post-evangelism infant church has been even more challenging—but far more rewarding. I cannot help but think of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 11:28: "Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches." May the Lord continue to use all of us to plant healthy, maturing churches for the sake of His name among the nations.

Questions for Conversation

1. Which aspects of this case study do you find most relevant and applicable to leader development in your context?
2. What do you think of the author's distinction between biblical and colonial paternalism?
3. Do you believe 18 months is a good timeline for developing local elders? Why or why not?