

ORGANIC PRINCIPLE

The heartbeat of a community is the foundation for positive change.

When the Roman Empire fell, the vast infrastructure it had built across Europe was abandoned and gradually deteriorated. The ruins became mere reminders of a once-great civilization. If a Roman had travelled forward in time to a medieval European village, the villagers would likely have shown him the remnants of his people's work, perhaps asking when he would rebuild what once was.

Similarly, Congo is dotted with relics—remnants of projects implemented and managed by well-intentioned foreigners from the past. When I arrived, a common activity was visiting these sites and answering questions about how I planned to help rebuild what had been lost. Like the time-travelling Roman, I represented a mission involved in development projects from previous generations.

I found it frustrating to visit communities and discover that the only functioning clinics were fully funded and often still managed by foreigners. Nothing could succeed without outside involvement. Did I need to teach the locals how to be more like me? One day, I met Steve, a village nurse who ran a functional clinic without any outside investment. I asked him how he had managed it without outside help. He replied, “I worked with the community to make it happen.” Steve had achieved success by uncovering a rhythm that the community had lost.

This encounter turned my understanding upside down. Just as it would be futile to teach me the Congolese soukous dance, I had been expecting the locals to adapt to my unfamiliar rhythm. I failed to appreciate that there was already a rich and unique rhythm within the community, just waiting to be tapped into.

Steve's locally conceived and implemented clinic was just beginning to take root when a respected charity came to town. In response to the apparent needs, they established a well-funded clinic with paid nurses, complementary medicine, and ample supplies. Steve was initially glad to see this assistance. But then he realized that his clinic could not compete. After a while, he closed his operation, left town, and moved to the city. A few years later, the charity closed its clinic to focus its efforts elsewhere, leaving the village without any healthcare.

It is not uncommon for charities, so focused on addressing needs, to overlook the community's unique rhythm. Their well-meaning strategies can become infused with systemic arrogance. Confident

in their own solutions, their efforts often dismiss local strengths. Those in need may feel they have little to offer and struggle to grasp the alien rhythms of foreigners. When outsiders leave, the community often cannot maintain the beat. The project fails and becomes a mere monument to a bygone era.

The key to understanding community rhythm is not to dwell on the impressive ruins left by foreign cultures, but rather to focus on the community's strengths. Communities have their own stories of resilience. These may not be as obvious as a grand Roman wall, but if you delve deeper, the remarkable elements of their own narratives emerge. This is their heartbeat and the foundation for transformation.

In Congo, rhythm can be felt especially when the national soccer team plays in the city. Soccer is central to Congolese culture. However, the true essence of this experience cannot be captured by watching a match on television. It is best experienced outdoors. I was outside when Congo scored against Cameroon, and the city erupted into a single, massive celebration. I could actually feel the vibrations in the air. This is the rhythm that must be embraced if there is any hope for positive change.

John Wesley, the English theologian, based his theological conclusions on four sources of authority: scripture, experience, reason, and tradition. This same approach can be applied to community change. When it comes to tradition, Wesley emphasized its importance by stating, "Do not undervalue traditional evidence. Let it have its place and its due honour. It is highly serviceable in its kind, and in its degree."¹

The Bible itself tells a story that spans a timeline. Understanding the historical narrative of Israel is essential to grasping who Jesus was, as He regularly quoted Jewish scriptures. In fact, the Gospels are difficult to comprehend without this historical context. Similarly, a community cannot be fully understood without knowledge of its own historical timeline.

To shape its future, an impoverished community must uncover its own story and acknowledge the significance of its traditions. According to Wesley, the experiences and history a community has undergone should be regarded as an essential source of authority.

The Organic Principle suggests that every community has a beautiful yet resilient rhythm. Although a demoralizing web of lies may muffle this rhythm, it still exists. It resembles an internal heartbeat, and it is worth discovering. When the rhythm is rediscovered and celebrated, it becomes the foundation for a sustainable and proud community.

¹ John Wesley, Works X, 75

Summary statement:

Every community is already functional to some degree. By tapping into its stories, members of the community can collectively rediscover their unique heartbeat and its legitimacy as a foundation.

Discussion

1. Think about your community. What makes it unique? Can you identify something that represents its essence, perhaps something you would call its heartbeat?
2. List successful projects or programs in your community that originated from local efforts and were implemented by residents.
3. Create a historical timeline of your community, beginning with its founding. Include details such as population growth, local leadership, primary sources of income, and significant events that led to change.
4. In what ways has your community shown resilience? Consider a couple of crises that your community has endured. What factors contributed to its strength and perseverance during those times?
5. Does your community share its stories? What steps can you take to encourage storytellers and promote active listening to those narratives?