



LOCALISATION & LEAVING

John and Angela Wilmot recently concluded ten years serving with Global Interaction among the Yao people in Malawi. But it hasn't been a case of just "up and leaving". No. The Wilmots have thought long and hard about how to best transition in the handing over of ministry to the Yao people.

Have you ever read a book with a bad ending? What a waste of time!

Considering all the time, energy and resources that are so often pumped into a task, it is somewhat surprising how often people find themselves plucked out without much time to prepare for how it will all end. And just like the book with a bad ending, the whole story flounders and fails. **While it is important how you start, it is perhaps even more important how you finish.**

When we first arrived in Malawi, a sense of urgency didn't exist for us. It had taken forever to actually jump all the hoops to get there and now that we were on Malawi soil there didn't seem to be a need for urgency. We were to be there for what seemed like eternity.

We got involved in initiating what is now known as LifeGroups. LifeGroups is a network of independent village faith communities that are figuring out how to follow Jesus in a truly Yao way. LifeGroups naturally evolved into a birthplace for innovative ways of empowering people to tackle the difficulties of life. Lots of things have been happening – a rural development program, community library and functional education programs. What's even more exciting than the growth of LifeGroups (there is now, across a huge geographical area, more than 120 LifeGroups with more than 4,000 adults regularly gathering) is that these groups are now being led and directed by the locals themselves.

Transition and succession became the key themes right from the very beginning, once we realised how temporary our involvement would really be. While some people may feel called to a place for life, for us that made no sense at all. We never came believing that the Yao needed us there forever. **Ultimately we came to do ourselves out of a job.** People are to be dependent on God, not us.

We realised that so much of our worldview had to be deconstructed. It was just too easy at the beginning to fall into the trap of it being about us and about what we came to do. In our Western culture, our identity is based upon what we do and achieve. Our titles, job and education define who we are. However many cultures are like the Yao, where your identity is an 'ascribed' identity. This means it's who you belong to, who you are connected to that matters and ultimately defines you. What you achieve is totally unsustainable if it is not connected with those to whom you belong.

Therefore, we spent the majority of our time resisting the urge to teach. Instead, we shared our stories, learned from those around us, until the depth of relationship earned us the right to share God's story.

We began to see ourselves as a scaffold: secure, but temporary. A scaffold exists for a purpose other than itself, totally focused on the purpose of what it exists to support. The endeavour had to involve the people we came to serve and include them in genuine partnership right from the start. It was our hope that as people began to follow Jesus, they would identify and reflect on the problems around them and solutions needed to rectify these issues. It was our hope that the local people, not the "foreign experts", would fill the gaps that existed; looking to God, each other and themselves. If experts were needed, they were to be part of the scaffold, not the centre of attention.

In understanding that we might not last the distance, sustainability had to be there from the beginning so that if we were to leave at any point, what was built could stand and function on its own. Strategically we developed some core principles which revolved around the concepts of our continued transition and succession to local leaders and people. Leadership became a key focus, as discipleship and leadership go hand in hand.

This emphasis on leadership is highlighted in LifeGroups' Leadership Training Program. This is a five-day intensive for the leaders of LifeGroups. These leaders then return to their home villages to pass on what they learnt to the other members of LifeGroups. A number of leaders have openly testified to God's work in their lives and have been challenged on a number of different levels. Clearly their faith is developing as they actively wrestle with how to follow Jesus in their own distinctive way.

The localisation of LifeGroups has been an incremental process, as is the process of transition and succession. In 2005 we began officially preparing with the leadership of LifeGroups for our succession, with the plan for us to transition to non-residential service by early 2009. This time frame provided LifeGroups with the opportunity to learn more and to plan a transition strategy, while looking seriously into succession planning and some of the external organisational complications.

The following list outlines the process of transition and succession of our work over the years that brought us to the point of full localisation and being able to leave Malawi.

LifeGroups - Process of Succession and Transition

1. Engage community and begin building social capital (ie. reputation in community)
2. Activate social capital at all levels and facilitate visioning and interdependence
3. Facilitate leadership and begin evolution of appropriate structures and experience
4. Facilitate growth through continued engagement and continue building of social capital and promoting independence
5. Facilitate values, vision, mission
6. Facilitate organisational identity and begin succession and transition planning
7. Facilitate institutionalisation and begin formalisation of legal and other requirements
8. Strengthen organisational structures, including the establishment of a stable administration
9. Facilitate key appointments, boards, constitution
10. Revise values, vision, mission
11. Review succession and transition
12. Implement and complete succession

Ultimately we didn't have the foresight to know how to make this succeed. It was faith. We came to the humble realisation that we brought nothing to the table and that it was God who provided everything.

Pulling away from things creates gaps. Its only when these gaps are apparent that people see the need to step in and fill them. **We chose to continually take steps back so the locals could take steps forward.**

So we chose to make our focus on local empowerment, local visioning, local structuring and local identifying of needs. We decided to live out our mission through strategy and intentionality. We came to leave, rather than make a career out of the people or become a victim of circumstance. But we also came to build genuine relationship through inclusion and interaction. These aims may seem a little like oil and vinegar; they make a great salad dressing but perhaps have some incongruence between them.

So we leave having enjoyed the most exciting and rewarding life but also experience an incredible ache of grief and loss as we leave our friends.

However, one of my favourite quotes illustrates the reason why we chose to leave.

Go to the people. Live with them. Learn from them. Love them. Start with what they know. Build with what they have. But with the best leaders, when the work is done, the task accomplished, the people will say "We have done this ourselves." (Lao Tzu)

In a recent letter from Malawi, my friend and LifeGroups Coordinator wrote: "Please pray we can communicate well with our families and friends that ministry will continue growing with the will of God. I am also delighted to inform you that, on 30th September 2009, there will be a baptism whereby 500 people are going to be baptised which is a wonderful thing in LifeGroups."

When the time has come and you must leave, the people will say, "We have done it ourselves."

JOHN WILMOT
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John, Angela and their seven children are now planning on serving a little closer to home – among Martu indigenous communities in Newman, Outback Australia.

They thank all who have partnered with them and the Yao people in the past 10 years.

If you would like to support John and Angela financially or through prayer, call 03 9819 4944, go to www.globalinteraction.org.au or complete the form on the back page.