



Executive Director's Communique May 2022

The Indigenous Bible School

For decades the supreme goal of healthy, spiritual mission organizations has been the establishment of the “indigenous church.” Indigenous is an adjective referring to characteristics of an agent, be it a church, animal, plant, or institution, which flourishes within its local environment without dependency on external resources. It is sustainable and can multiply and thrive under local conditions whether harsh and severe or mild and gentle.

The concept of the indigenous church, grounded in Scripture, was developed by mission practitioners like Roland Allen, Alice Luce, and Melvin Hodges. They proposed three key ingredients that characterized “indigenous”: self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. For the indigenous church, **self-governing** meant that the church was led by local people chosen using local selection processes, guided using local methods of leadership, and organized using local authority structures. **Self-supporting** meant that the resources for the operation and ministry of the church were generated from those who were part of the church and who benefited from its ministries. These churches looked to God and to their own people for support. **Self-propagating** referred to the characteristic of growing, multiplying, and expanding. Churches evangelized using local languages and cultural forms of communication, disciplined people within their circles of influence, and planted new churches.

Further analysis of the early church reveals several other essential “indigenous” characteristics. The early church used Scripture to address unique issues arising from its own cultural, societal, and spiritual context. This could be called **self-contextualizing** in terms of local churches formulating doctrines and practices which showed their communities that the gospel was good news relevant to every distinct people and location.

The natural tendency of people is to be attracted to and communicate with like-minded people who have their same language and cultural practices. But to obey Jesus’ Great Commission mandate (Matt. 28:19-20) – disciple every ethnic people – local, indigenous churches must recognize that the Spirit is calling some of their members to leave their local context, cross over cultural and geographic boundaries, and bring the gospel to people of other languages and cultures. While “going” runs contrary to the centripetal forces of family and the familiar, truly indigenous churches will be **self-sending**: selecting, training, and sending members of their local community to peoples who are ethnically and linguistically different and who lack any witness of the gospel in their local context.

A final trait of the earliest, indigenous churches was their generosity and acts of compassion. While many members of indigenous churches were poor and persecuted, they responded to the needs of widows, orphans, and the disenfranchised. From their own resources and according to their willingness, they gave. Note, the flow of these resources was not aimed at church leaders and church-based ministries, but to people both inside and outside the body of Christ who were in need and struggling to survive. The churches were **self-caring** expressing acts of charity and benevolence.

These six characteristics describe indigenous churches that will thrive, multiply, and expand within a culture and beyond. They will be self-sustaining no matter what local or global crises come their way. These churches will obey Christ’s great command (Matt. 23:36-40) and complete his great commission. Are our Bible schools preparing students to plant and establish indigenous churches? And do our *schools* follow these same indigenous principles in terms of leadership, financial support, outreach to our neighbors, contextualizing our training curriculums, being missional in our very ethos, and expressing compassion for the communities where we are based?