



Chapter 13

Involvement with a Not-For-Profit Company: An Insight from a Mission Worker

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Abstract

This chapter is an autoethnographic reflection of the author, a mission worker under an organisation called InnerCHANGE, and involved with a not-for-profit organisation called Nova. Nova's goal is to be a centre of excellence in the development and implementation of products and services that improve the quality of life of low-income households and to take the solution to scale in Southern Africa with households and networks. The author is a mission worker serving incarnationally in a community of poverty in South Africa. His goal is to communicate the good news of the gospel in tangible and transformational ways. He is therefore constantly on the lookout for new strategies and new skills to achieve his goal. He sees his efforts as an attempt to be a good news agent in society. He lives in a local community where the presence of Christian churches of various denominations is prominent and visible. Yet, this is a local community where residents long for love in action to be demonstrated by the church and other institutions. This research asks: How can the church remain teachable about what it means to be good news to the world around it? The author uses the book of the Bible, Jeremiah 29:7, as an interpretive framework to reflect on his experiences of learning from Nova and how he could contribute to the improvement of Nova's output in its aim to improve the quality of households located



in communities of poverty. He discovered that Nova's vision of healthy household culture has challenged InnerCHANGE to seek to minister to an entire household, not an individual alone. He has also discovered that pursuing a good quality of life through practical ministry is a valid form of evangelism. He has learned to entertain partnerships with various organisations that believe in making a difference in ordinary people's everyday lives. He is finally learning to be involved in various communities of poverty so that everyday lives can be transformed positively. The chapter concludes that a healthy partnership between Nova and InnerCHANGE South Africa could be mutually beneficial. Nova could improve its ability to involve residents of communities of poverty where it is working in their participation in solution-seeking. InnerCHANGE South Africa could strengthen its incarnational approach through tangible projects that improve the quality of life of ordinary people.

Keywords: agency, household, incarnation, love, multiplication, partnership, relationship

1. Introduction

This autoethnographic reflection undertakes “to describe and systematically analyse” the author's involvement in incarnational mission in communities of poverty as well as with a not-for-profit company, Nova (Ellis et al., 2010, p. 1). He understands incarnational mission as living in and serving alongside residents of communities of poverty with the goal of making them disciples of Jesus Christ. Nova's goal is to be a centre of excellence in the development and implementation of products and services that improve the quality of life of low-income households and to take the solution to scale in Southern Africa with households and networks. This organisation “explores with low-income households and other stakeholders, effective combinations of thoughts and things that can improve quality of life” (Murray & Pauw, 2022, p. 95). The mission organisation that the author is a part of is called InnerCHANGE. InnerCHANGE members “pursue agency from below in catalysing community transformation inspired by the biblical passage to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with

our God” (Kabongo, 2021, p. 1). Their incarnational approach is about identification with the poor and a search to emulate biblical values in a way that is understandable, meaningful, and tangible. One of their main goals is to catalyse the improvement of quality of life from the inside out. The author’s involvement with Nova has to do with his desire to learn new strategies and skills that could improve InnerCHANGE South Africa’s (ICSA hereafter) capacity and ability to improve the quality of life of residents of the neighbourhoods of poverty that it serves. ICSA staff and volunteers’ main goal is to be good news agents. They describe a good news agent as “a follower of Jesus who seeks the peace and prosperity of their context in tangible ways and invites other people to do the same so that quality of life can be improved, lives can flourish and communities can be built from the inside out” (Kabongo, 2020, p. 6). This understanding is inspired by Jeremiah 29:7: “Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (NIV version). This passage will serve as an interpretive framework for this research as it answers this question: How can the church remain teachable about what it means to be good news to the world around it? The author’s historical involvement with ICSA and Nova could shed some light on his quest to remain teachable as a good news agent.

2. Historical involvement with ICSA and Nova

This historical overview seeks to connect the author’s “personal experiences to wider cultural, political and social meanings and understandings” (see Ellis et al., 2010, p. 3) as he tries to make a transformational impact in the everyday lives of people from below. He joined ICSA, a Christian order amongst the poor, in 2007. ICSA started in 1984 in the United States of America. Its founder, John Hayes, is a former businessman who responded to God’s call to serve and live incarnationally amongst the Latino and Cambodian refugees.

The author and his wife pioneered ICSA work in South Africa. They moved to the township of Soshanguve¹ from a suburb ²of Pretoria North (Florauna) on 1 April 2008. The author was part of another mission organisation called NieuCommunities, where the focus was to train missional leaders cross-culturally. NieuCommunities partnered with various ministries across the city of Pretoria, including the township of Soshanguve. It is from the many connections that NieuCommunities had made in the township of Soshanguve that the author and his wife started ICSA work. Their ministry focus has been to make disciples of Jesus through relationships and practical ministry initiatives in their local community. They also emphasise developing their disciples into good news agents.

The author came into contact with Nova through his interaction with one of its founders, Attie van Niekerk³. The latter was his study supervisor at the University of Pretoria, starting from 2008 while reading his honours degree studies until 2019 when he completed his doctoral studies with the thesis titled *A missional approach to school dropout in a poor urban area of South Africa*. It is through his interactions with Attie van Niekerk that he learned to integrate the expression ‘good quality of life’ into his ministry goals. He is continuously learning to develop and promote ways to improve the quality of life of ordinary people living in a community of poverty, such as Soshanguve. Van Niekerk (2014, p. 3) states that “quality of life is determined by the interaction between standard of

1 The name Soshanguve is an acronym of the ethnic groups that lived in that location when it was recognised as a township in 1974. These ethnic groups are SO (Sotho), SHA (Shangani), NGU (Nguni) and VE (Venda). The former South African system of apartheid (meaning separatedness) was implemented in that location because people from one ethnic group were placed in one specific section of the township. In South Africa, a township is an underdeveloped, racially segregated urban area that, from the late 19th century until 1994, was reserved for non-whites. They were usually built on the periphery of towns and cities. Soshanguve was a location for black people only. It is located 40 kilometres north of the city of Pretoria (Kabongo, 2019:1).

2 In the South African context, “suburbs are referred to as small residential communities found within travelling distance to a city centre”(Logan, 2020, p. 1).

3 Editors’ note: One of the authors in our book.

living, perceived well-being and bodily functioning”. The author is also learning “to measure and monitor the impact” of what ICSA is doing in the improvement of the quality of life of ordinary people. He now serves as a non-executive director of Nova. He would like to see this role be an added value both to Nova and ICSA.

3. Interpretive framework of Jeremiah 29:7

The text

The book of Jeremiah narrates a turbulent period of the kingdom of Judah, beginning with the death of King Josiah (609 BCE) and the loss of independence that followed, through the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and the exile of much of its population (587–586) (Ofo’ia, 2017). One may argue that this book describes God’s covenant with believers and His expectations of His believers in playing an “active role in society” (Suderman, 2014, p. 52). The exile situation was understood by the Israelites as a punishment because of disobedience. A move back home could have been seen as God forgiving the Israelites. The prophet Hananiah emerged during that turbulent time and gave false hope to the Israelites by telling them that “God was going to free them and help them return to their homeland after 2 years” (Ofo’ia, 2017). The prophet Jeremiah came to challenge Hananiah’s message and invited the Israelites to see themselves no longer as exiles, but as citizens of the context they lived in because “they will be there for another 70 years” (Ofo’ia, 2017).

The prophet Jeremiah’s message helps to change the victim’s mindset of feeling punished by God to that of active participation in building up their new places of residence. Jeremiah 29, especially its beginning verses until verse 7, portrays God as someone who is concerned with the improvement of the everyday lives of peoples and stresses “the role believers should play” to improve the quality of life around them (White, 2015, p. 1). Verse 7 will help to frame the author’s interpretation of his involvement with ICSA and Nova. This verse

“tells us how it is important for religious people to participate in national development in order to transform society” (White, 2015, p. 1). The author believes that one of the effective ways to participate in transforming society is to start small at a local community level. The church should challenge itself to become involved in transformational work at the local community level. Such involvement could be a prophetic witnessing of “God’s commitment to restoration and peace through his children” (Suderman, 2014, p. 54)

Nova and ICSA value participation in the restoration and improvement of the quality of life of ordinary people through their efforts. Through his involvement with ICSA and Nova, the author is learning to minister to a whole household in his incarnational approach to ministry. He is increasingly comfortable in his understanding that good deeds could be an effective tool for evangelism. He is also building his networking muscles with like-minded organisations that believe in making a difference in people from below in their everyday lives. He is finally learning to involve ICSA in various communities of poverty so that everyday lives can be improved.

4. Embracing the whole household

As a community-based ministry, ICSA usually starts building relationships with an individual. It is learning to be intentional about becoming involved with a whole household. It has been learned from Van Niekerk (2015, p. 2) that “the household has always been the centre of social, economic and religious life in African culture”. However, townships such as Soshanguve are typical urban communities characterised by many “unstable families” (Magezi, 2018, p. 2). In the context of South Africa, one would argue that industrialisation and modernisation are contributing factors to this lack of stability of families. This situation has caused issues such as “high population growth, sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS, malnutrition, poor school results, violence and crime, pollution, homelessness and street children” (Van Niekerk, 2015, p. 2).

Unstable families also seem to be caused by aspects of culture. Marriage is an important institution in African culture. This institution seems to be under threat because it is increasingly commodified, and few people in places such as Soshanguve can afford to become married. Many adults resort to “cohabiting” although their families may disagree with such a decision (Kabongo, 2020, p. 1). Countrywide in South Africa, there seems to be a “rising trend in cohabitation” (Semenya, 2016, p. 3). Cohabitation does not seem to offer the support that a household needs from their extended families to thrive, because the only acceptable situation when a man and woman live together is to become married.

Another issue that a local community such as Soshanguve faces is the decline in the support system within households and families from one generation to another. African traditional societies prided themselves on parents “passing on material resources and wisdom to their children” (Magezi, 2018, p. 2). However, with the boom of industrialisation and urbanisation, children moved away from their homesteads, got jobs and became independent from their customary ways of living” (Magezi, 2018, p. 2). Another noticeable issue in urban communities such as Soshanguve is weak “solidarity” amongst neighbours and that the “formation of social networks” is hard (Puschmann & Solli, 2014, p. 2). It is, therefore, sensible for incarnational ministries such as ICSA to proactively participate in restoring “households and families” in communities of poverty such as Soshanguve if they wish to improve the quality of life of its residents (Van Niekerk, 2015, p. 4). ICSA staff and volunteers conduct regular house visits to families of the people whom it serves. Through this action, it seeks “to understand the needs, perceptions, expectations and survival strategies” of these neighbours (Van Niekerk, 2015, p. 4). ICSA’s home visits aim to listen to neighbours so that it can act in serving in relevant and sustainable ways. During those visits, ICSA staff and volunteers aim to learn more about the living circumstances of its beneficiaries and the quality of life of the household that cares for a beneficiary. The majority of its ministry initiatives, such as children’s clubs, tutoring clubs, reading clubs, football,

and beadwork clubs, started as a response to how the local communities that it is involved in wanted to be served.

5. Good deeds as an evangelism tool

ICSA strives to serve local communities in practical ways. It runs a variety of initiatives in areas such as sports, education and farming. These practical initiatives are inspired by John 13:35, which mentions how Christians should be known in society: by the way that they love others around them. In African communities of poverty, such as Soshanguve, love seems to be best communicated when it is tangible. It is felt when “it can be seen, touched and handled” (Hayes 2006, p. 113). Communities of poverty long for love. ICSA has come to understand poverty as the lack of love. Through its interaction with many of its neighbours, it has come to see poverty as “the result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable...[It] is the absence of shalom in all its meanings” (Myers, 2011, p. 89). ICSA intends to build functional relationships with the people whom it serves and ideally with all the residents of the local communities it serves in.

Nova seems to share the same value of building functional relationships with households located in communities of poverty towards a common good. Its “Brickstar programme is a good example” of that (Nova Institute, 2024). It helped to mobilise the residents of the village of Molati in the northern province of Limpopo to build an efficient cooking stove using available resources such as cow dung, clay, salt and water. The project was executed successfully. This was and is still a significant symbol of “co-creating a solution”⁴ between a local community and an organisation (Nova Institute, 2024). Practical projects such as Brickstar and practical ministry initiatives that ICSA runs could be effective ways to nurture agency from below, which is arguably one of the best ways to develop communities of poverty. The fruits of nurturing agency from below could be good news to people. For a mission organisation such as ICSA,

4 Editors’ note: The message of Chapter 9.

such fruits have been platforms to evangelise in sharing the gospel with non-believers. This platform is also used to disciple believers who multiply other believers.

6. Networking

The goal of nurturing agency from below so that the quality of life of residents from a local community could be improved is a big task. One organisation cannot do that. A collaborative partnership with various role players could be the solution. ICSA works in partnership with different organisations as it serves local communities of poverty. Nova works on developing resources that could allow institutions such as the church to meaningfully become “involved with issues in their local communities” (Nova Institute, 2024). Partnership with like-minded organisations improves “effectiveness” in output (Alawode, 2024, p. 1). Christians believe that “God created the world to function in mutual relationships” (Alawode, 2024, p. 1). Christians are therefore encouraged “to build relations, which would contribute to community building (Van Niekerk, 2014, p. 4).

As a mission organisation, ICSA’s experience is that mission is most fruitful when it is “carried out through partnership” (Alawode, 2024, p. 6). Hence, it is important for ICSA to network with an organisation such as Nova. Networks could be understood as “selective connections (edges) between several elements (nodes), which may form in a certain pattern” (Holzer, 2010, p. 34). Networks could also be understood as “hybrid forms of formal and informal ties that have an undefined or open edge, which facilitates access to them” (Eurich, 2020, p. 5). Networking should have the goal of helping an incarnational ministry such as ICSA relate better to its context and “the needs that arise within it” (Eurich, 2020, p. 6).

7. Expansion/multiplication

ICSA is an organisation that was founded in 1984. Traditionally, ICSA focuses its efforts in one local community. Over the past few years, ICSA has been expanding its efforts in various

local communities. Nova has been a good role model in this new approach. Nova has performed work in several local communities in South Africa.

8. Reflection

The author feels called to the incarnational approach to ministry. He is aware of other approaches. However, his reflection is on the incarnational approach that has influenced his worldview. A simple understanding of incarnational ministry is “mission with others” (Riemer & Banda, 2016, p. 6). This understanding comes from the biblical interpretation of John 1:14, which states that the Logos chose to become human and lived in his world side by side with other humans. Then the Logos metamorphosed into a human being who chose to partner with ordinary human beings during his active ministry in this world (Mark 1:16–20). The above-mentioned Logos is understood to be Jesus. Through incarnation, Jesus moved into a “neighbourhood” to be, live and journey with fellow human beings. The concept of incarnation helps Christians to see Jesus “become flesh in every...context” (Bosch, 1991, p. 21). It also challenges Christians “to hold the Word in one hand and the world in the other, engaging them both in a long conversation” (Van Dyke & Rocke, 2012, p. 46).

The author would like to see ordinary people participate in the *missio Dei* in the world as Jesus did. He believes that ordinary people are assets in making a positive difference in their everyday lives. ICSA believes that an effective way to make a positive difference in the lives of ordinary people is by focusing on one local community at a time. It believes that “a comprehensive missional approach to ecclesiology needs to embrace place. Christian life... must be grounded in the surrounding context – the neighbourhood” (Niemandt, 2019, p. 1). It is in “one concrete place” where there is a potential that Christian values and principles can be felt as good news to the world (Fitch, 2016, p. 401). It is in a concrete place where a tangible “interaction between God and the world” can be experienced meaningfully (Inge, 1999, p. 46).

Nova's work on households located in South African communities of poverty is deepening the author's understanding of incarnational ministry. Nova's approach seems to value the inputs of local residents in problem statements and solution-seeking. Like Jesus' approach, 'work with' is valued. For example, in a Re-baseline Services Report conducted as part of the Sasol Secunda Phase 2 Offset Programme re-baseline, Nova interviewed many residents of the communities of eMbalebhle and Lebohang to assess their service delivery satisfaction in areas of access to water, sanitation, electricity and waste⁵ (Nova Institute, 2013). Through this process, Nova reported that the "overall household satisfaction with services related to water, waste, sanitation, electricity and housing is poor". Nova found out that the reason behind the "decreased satisfaction" was because of new unserved informal areas, which decreased the proportion of households with access to services, and an increase in reported service delivery failure frequency. It is encouraging to see that the findings and the lessons were generated from below. This is the kind of approach that made the author accept the role of a non-executive director at Nova.

The author believes that involving people from below in mission and community development offers a better prospect for a sustainable model to improve the quality of life of Africans living in communities of poverty. Such involvement also has the potential to improve people's well-being⁶. The latter concept "can be understood as how people feel and how they function both on a personal and social level, and how they evaluate their lives as a whole" (Jarden & Roache, 2023, p. 1). Well-being also has a positive effect on someone's mental balance. It can improve "a sense of tranquillity resulting from inner peace and harmonious interactions with external environment (Jarden & Roache, 2023, p. 2). Such involvements offer better wisdom in framing "decisions in terms of years and decades" to come (Mollenkamp, 2025). ICSA's central ministry focus is to make disciples of Jesus and develop local leaders. The development

5 Editors' note: Discussed in Chapter 11.

6 Editors' note: In the light of the definition of *Planetary Well-being* in Chapter 1, this should also contribute to planetary well-being.

of local leaders is seen as a sustainable way to continue God's mission in communities of poverty. This is still a work in progress because the majority of ICSA's top leaders are not local leaders although it is 40 years old. Additionally, ICSA's recruitment of local leaders is happening at a slow pace. One could argue that this pace of recruiting local leaders may be the result of ICSA's understanding of its contribution to the *missio Dei*. It sees itself as "mission communities that are part team, part tribe, part family" (Hayes, 2006, p. 14). It is known that families and tribes have customs and practices that make them unique and define their rule of life. These customs and practices are never culture blind. ICSA was started in the United States of America by a white male North American. Currently, most of its top leaders are white Americans. The author continues to wonder what it would take to diversify the face of the top leadership team culturally.

A similar observation can be made about Nova. The majority of its top leaders are white South Africans. Yet the majority of its projects on households are meant to benefit the poor who are black in their majority. The author is still wondering how much of the insider voices (people living in communities where the researches are conducted) are included in the final reports that are produced and submitted for implementation.⁷

The author believes that the primary assets in improving the quality of life in households located in communities of poverty are members of those households. It can be said that 'people who are in need' usually have half the solution to their problem (Linthicum, 2003, p. 19). It therefore makes sense to involve them in solution-seeking. ICSA conducts home visits regularly as it attempts to be a relevant and meaningful incarnational ministry. ICSA is primarily a team of local leaders feeling called to be good news agents. The team only has one foreign national, the author, who grew up in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Many of these local residents have informed the kind of practical ministries that ICSA performs. These

7 Editors' note: Compare the text boxes of Piqola discussed in the previous chapter, Chapter 12.

practical ministries have been fertile grounds. ICSA is making disciples and developing local leaders. The ICSA experience seems to be in agreement with the historical fact that when the Christian movement has emphasised disciple-making, two things have happened: new disciples have been made, and Christians have a social influence out of proportion to their numbers (Hunter, 2011). ICSA's prioritisation of discipleship depicts its desire to be a tangible sign of seeking the peace and prosperity of the contexts it serves, as well as multiplying its efforts and impacts in new local communities.

9. Conclusion

This autoethnographic chapter used Jeremiah 29:7 as an interpretative framework to reflect on the merit of the author's involvement with both ICSA and Nova. It aimed to discover how the church can remain teachable about what it means to be good news to the world around it. A church that values incarnational ministry should stress embracing a whole household as it engages in relational ministries. It should also be open to networking and partnering with like-minded organisations that seek to improve the quality of life of people from below. An incarnational ministry such as ICSA should be open to expanding and multiplying into different local communities as part of its contribution to participate in the great commission. It was stressed that organisations such as ICSA and Nova need to prioritise the recruiting of local leaders to reflect the concept of ministering with or working with, which they value. The recruiting of local leaders communicates the intent to contribute to and participate in the work of reconciliation of all races, as well as reconciliation of residents in communities of poverty who seem to still have strong ethnic identities that sometimes hurt cohesion within local communities.

It seems like a healthy partnership between Nova and ICSA could be mutually beneficial. Nova could improve its ability to involve residents of communities of poverty where it is working in their participation in solution-seeking. ICSA could strengthen its incarnational approach through tangible projects that improve the quality of life of ordinary people.

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Chapter 13

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Development in the Anthropocene

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