

Biblical Leadership Transition in the Sudanese Cultural Context – James Dema Marchello

The process of leadership change is a big problem in any society and particularly in Africa – be it in the political or religious arena. Few things create more anxiety for an organisation or a community than having to find a new leader. People find it hard to think about transition, especially when they are used to some leaders who have been in place for many years. This makes many people unable or unwilling to plan: “How do we change our leader?”

However, changes are inevitable, whether we like it or not. The leaders we love and admire, or those that we hate, will eventually depart – whether they move to a new assignment, retire or die. Being unprepared for that day can cause chaos for those charged with finding a replacement. It can create a difficult time for whoever assumes office after the departure of a predecessor. It can even endanger the stability of a successful church or nation. Just a year after the signing of the Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement (C.P.A.), John Garang died in a tragic plane crash. The biggest fear was finding and installing his immediate replacement. Thank God this replacement was largely peaceful, contrary to the fears of many. The violence and killings immediately after the death are regrettable.

Even though change is inevitable, our experience in Africa is that incumbent leaders are die-hards. People in leadership, even when they are no longer performing, find it difficult to relinquish power or to groom others to replace themselves. It is rare to find leaders who are in office preparing their successors. If it actually does happen it is by default not by design.

The common practice is that potential successors are deliberately sidelined or even eliminated altogether. Some military coups in Africa, though unfortunate, are precipitated by the fact that no one knew when the incumbent would leave office. In the light of Biblical revelation, the church should show the right way through any transition situation. Unfortunately, the church has often copied the leadership style of the world rather than influencing the world with Christian principles.

There are abundant examples of leadership change and transition in the Scriptures. The classic example in the Old Testament is that of Moses and Joshua. Please read Numbers 27:12-23 and

Deuteronomy 31-34, especially 31:1-8; 31:14; 32:34; 34:9. Moses was aware of the challenges of leadership change and transition. For that very reason he began to prepare his people for a change in leadership. He knew that after his death, it would be difficult both for Joshua and the people. This precedent set by Moses is inspiring and challenging at the same time. There are a number of lessons the church and the wider community in Sudan can learn from the example of Moses and Joshua.

How to Foster¹ Smooth Leadership Transition:

1. Remember that No Leader is Indispensable

This is a fact any human leader has to reckon with. No leader, no matter how skilled and charismatic he or she may be, is indispensable in any given time –all are replaceable. Moses was not consumed by his position as leader of the community of Israel. He knew that his time was drawing near and he embraced the reality of change. Moses demonstrated readiness and willingness to accept the reality of change and transition. Read Deuteronomy 31:1-2.

Change is inevitable and we all need to be ready for when it happens. One Sudanese bishop is fond of saying, “if you do not change, change will change you”.² Although Moses was still strong and in good health, he wisely realised it was time for a change of leader. He was well aware that he would not cross the Jordan into the Promised Land. The Lord had told him.³

There are many reasons for leadership change. It may be age or death or the need for a new direction with new skills. What is important to understand is that, as change is inevitable and we are dispensable, we should *be prepared* for when change happens.

This example of being prepared for the inevitable is clearly demonstrated in many Sudanese communities. For example, an aging father will prepare one of his trusted sons or daughters (in some communities) to assume responsibility when the inevitable happens. Unfortunately this valuable example is not emulated by our churches or government when it comes to leadership transition. I repeat, leadership transition in our religious and political contexts is by default rather than by design.

¹ to foster means “to help something to develop over a period of time” Macmillan School Dictionary (Oxford: Macmillan) 2004.

² Rt. Rev'd. Bullen Dolli

³ Numbers 20:12-13; Numbers 27:12-14

Those aspiring for leadership have to elbow their way in rather than being properly and adequately prepared in good time.

Democracy in Africa would be unique and stable if our incumbent leaders prepared their successors as practised in many parts of our societies. We do not see a community struggling for a new village chief when the present chief dies. Someone was already groomed to replace him, paving the way for a smooth transition. A proper procedure is put in place which everyone knows and respects. We have learned that Moses' primary thought was for his successor. As the saying goes, "There is no success without a successor." Moses did not moan about his own loss. He prayed for and prepared the next leader, Joshua. We are likely to have smooth and stable leadership transitions only when we keep succession constantly in mind.

2. Root All Leadership in the Word of God

The second important lesson from Moses and Joshua's leadership transition is that whatever we do must be in line with God's Word, Deuteronomy 31:9-13. We're not sure exactly what Moses had in mind when he used the expression "the law," but he is probably referring to Deuteronomy chapters 5-28. He was making sure that though the people were encouraged to follow Joshua's leadership, they were even more committed to follow the Lord's teachings. The subsequent history of Israel demonstrates that leaders do not always honour the Lord. Leaders change with time and they change themselves. Yet the words of God are timeless. Transition should always be met with careful attention paid to our covenant relationship with the Lord, His teachings and promises. A leader may be born with the potential to lead, but it is God who works with that leader and encourages him so that his potential is realised.

Whoever wishes to see the anointing and blessing of the Lord upon their leadership tenure must obey and follow God's Word. Paul admonishes young Timothy to watch his life and doctrine closely as it is a crucial key to his salvation and that of his followers, I Timothy 4:16. Taking heed to God's Word will help shape the kind of leaders that God wants.

Letting the Word of God be our standard helps us escape some negative cultural hindrances. For example, when tribal allegiances override Christian brotherhood. We see this danger during leadership selections in churches. Someone is elected into a leadership position, not because he or she is spiritually and suitably qualified, but because of the tribe they are from. This is wrong. May God have mercy on us when we water down the Word of God for the sake of our own traditions.

3. Give Leadership Away

Moses and Joshua both show a readiness to accept new leadership, Deuteronomy 31:7-8. Details of Joshua being entrusted with new leadership responsibilities are in Numbers 27:18-23. Note that God realised the importance of Moses' role in making Joshua a success. The retiring leader (Moses) helped make the new leader (Joshua) what God wanted him to be. Leaders of all walks of life, including bishops, pastors, civil leaders, youth leaders, women's group leaders, all need to accept this responsibility as they handover to their successors.

Many of today's leaders are afraid of losing their own authority by handing over responsibility. We often see elderly leaders afraid of young leaders coming up. There could be several reasons for this: jealousy towards the new leaders who might be more educated, fear of the new leader discovering errors in current leadership, or fear of young leaders soon becoming better leaders than the present leadership. Yet for the work to continue, a leader must raise up other leaders. If we do not, the work will die!

Recently, (2007-2008), the Episcopal Church of Sudan has witnessed key leadership transitions where elderly bishops (leaders) hand over to younger ones in a spirit of prayer, of trust and with transparency.⁴ This is a good precedent that our civil and political leadership, plus other sister churches, should emulate. Moses learned an important lesson for us all: how to give leadership away, Numbers 11:1-35. It is sobering to note that Joshua, who was privileged to receive Moses' mantle of leadership, tried to stop other gifted people from standing before the community, verse 28. Moses responded, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the

⁴ For example, the Bishop of Kajo-Keji diocese, Rt. Rev'd. Anthony Poggo Dansasuk taking over from retired Bishop Manase Binyi Daudi; the Bishop of Mundri diocese, Rt. Rev'd. Bismark Avokaya, taking over from retired Bishop Dr Eluzai Munda; the Bishop of Torit diocese, Rt. Rev'd. Bernard Oringa Balmoi taking over from retired bishop Wilson Arop; the Bishop of Ezo diocese Rt. Rev'd. John Zawo taking over from retired Bishop Benjamin Ruate and in 2008 the Most Rev'd. Dr Joseph Marona retired and was replaced as Archbishop by Rt. Rev'd. Daniel Deng Bul, Bishop from the Diocese of Renk.

Lord would put His Spirit on them!", verse 29. That is the kind of godly attitude that God's chosen leaders need to display all the time. In the work of God there is no competition when we operate according to our gifting and God's timing.

4. Publicly Recognise What God is Doing in Lives

Moses publicly brought the emerging leader Joshua on to the platform and gave him authority, compare Deuteronomy 31:1 & 31:7. In front of all the Israelites, Moses summoned Joshua and made him the peoples' new leader. In a sense, Moses got out of the way, allowing Joshua to stand before God and before the people. Joshua stood with visible authority as a leader of the people. Today's leaders are expected to act in the same manner.

When the moment arrived, Moses laid his hands on Joshua and publicly commissioned him, Numbers 27:22-23; Deuteronomy 34:9. He gave Joshua part of his authority and Joshua received positive recognition. Joshua was a leader approved and accepted. Moses expressed faith in him. After the death of Moses, no one questioned Joshua's leadership authority or legitimacy. One would wish to see such smooth and peaceful power sharing and delegation in our communities today.

Moses' laying of hands symbolised the transference of covenant authority and responsibility. This is similar to ordination today. One important thing to note is that it was not just his laying of hands on Joshua that caused the Israelites to follow him. It was the spirit of wisdom evidenced in Joshua's life that made the difference, Numbers 27:18; Deuteronomy 34:9. Mere ordination does not necessarily make you a man or woman of God. There must be clear evidence of God's touch in your life.

Leaders must prove themselves worthy of a genuine following. People will be attracted to follow godly leaders who evidence the presence of the Spirit of God in their lives. This enables everyone to explore new directions for their lives and ministry.

5. Respect God as the Ultimate Leader

Of course we must always keep uppermost in our minds that God is the leader of us all. He was in Moses' time and He is now. Any human leader has only a delegated authority from God. Every leader

should be careful not to usurp what rightly belongs to God. A careful reflection on the Judges and the Kings in the Old Testament reveals that every one of them was called into leadership to guide their people *as God directed them*. God directed when each one was called into power and when each leader relinquished power. Some served well, in a faithful manner, following God's directives and plans for them. Others, unfortunately, followed their own plans. They did much harm, often being removed from power forcefully or by an untimely death.

Consider the good transition of power between Elijah and Elisha⁵. Reflect on Jesus handing over the ministry to His disciples when He ascended back to Heaven.⁶ Consider the countless men and women that Paul and the other apostles raised up in various churches to preach and lead the people locally as they continued to travel on missionary journeys.⁷

6. Give Others Opportunities to Gain Experience

Moses gave his successor Joshua both experience and opportunity. Moses shared his life and his responsibilities with Joshua. He allowed Joshua to prove his leadership.⁸ This mentorship is a wonderful way of grooming new leaders. If you want to raise leaders you walk with them, you share your experiences with them, you simply share your life with them! There is no other way you can raise a leader who will share your vision.

Moses gave encouragement and affirmation to Joshua his successor. Moses affirmed his trust in Joshua by taking him along on journeys that no one else participated in. They shared a unique intimacy and Moses encouraged him throughout the transition period. Because Moses spent the time necessary to reproduce himself in Joshua, his dream of Israel entering the Promised Land came to pass, even though he did not personally see it happen.

Many of the ways we mentor leaders today are quite different from the example of Moses. We offer lectures and organise seminars and just relax, thinking this will do the job. Workshops and seminars have their place, but lives are more impacted when we mentor others through our exemplary lifestyle.

⁵ 1 Kings 19:19-21; 2 Kings 2:1-15

⁶ Luke 24:25-27; Luke 24:45-48; Acts 1:4-11

⁷ Acts 14:21-25; Acts 20:1-6; Acts 20:17-38; (Acts 13:4-5; Acts 13:13; Acts 15:36-41; Timothy 4:11)

⁸ Trace this through Exodus 17:8-10; 24:12-13; 33:11; Numbers 11:28; 13:8; 14:6-9; 27:15-23; 34:16-17; Deuteronomy 1:37-38; 3:21-22; 31:7-8; 34:9; Joshua 1:1-11

Paul told Timothy that *the things he has seen and heard* he should put into practice, 2 Timothy 1:13; 2:2; 3:10-14. (See also 1 Corinthians 11:1; Philippians 3:17; 2 Thessalonians 3:7). In turn, Timothy himself should set an example to those he sought to lead, 1 Timothy 4:12.

The leader encourages the successor. The leader leads him or her through challenges. The leader gives the successor his time, his insight, a learning environment, and opportunities to prove himself. The old leader shares a strong belief in the new leader's future.

Practical Suggestions

In the light of the above lessons, what practical steps are needed to foster a smooth leadership transition? The following insights are gleaned from John Maxwell's Leadership Bible:⁹

1. Look for those that have proven themselves

Joshua had already proved himself from time to time. He displayed the right attitude as Moses' assistant. He demonstrated a conviction to follow God. He had the courage to fight for his beliefs. He showed willingness to obey both God and Moses his mentor. This made him a good candidate for further leadership development. Joshua had an attitude that made him a potential leader!

2. Develop and equip the emerging leaders

Leaders who mentor others should bear the responsibility for providing emerging leaders with the things they don't have on their own. The following steps might start you in the right direction:

- Don't only spend time with emerging leaders – be strategic! Think of your interaction as an investment based on vision.
- Give feedback on progress to the emerging leaders. Let them know how they are doing!
- Your relationship is like the glue that holds you and the people you are mentoring together. The greater the challenges during the process, the more solid the relationship must be. Work at it!

⁹ John Maxwell Leadership Bible (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson) 2002.

- Encourage the emerging leaders even though they make mistakes and fail. Your positive words will offer the only thing of value they can count on during these most difficult times. Without encouragement, they may lack the will to persevere and keep moving forward.
- Approach emerging leaders as you would your dearly loved children, with patience, perspective and a positive attitude.

3. Give space for the emerging leaders to develop their own vision

Investing in new leaders begins by inviting them to share and participate in your vision. But there has to come a time when you release the new leaders to develop their own vision. They must either internalise and be convinced of your vision, so that they own it, or they must develop it with their own vision. We all know that no one can borrow a vision. Each person must possess his own. As a mentor, your prayer should ask God to bless the people you mentor with godly vision. It is vision that will sustain them as they become leaders.

To conclude it is important to highlight the practical implications of this teaching on three common practices. Otherwise only tradition will effect leadership transition in a Sudanese cultural context:

- **The practice of kin groups.** In the different regions of Sudan one finds traditional clan structures function differently. In some regions, one clan holds all positions of leadership. In others, authority is delegated among various clans and sub-clans. Kinship ties are reckoned through connections on both the mother's side and the father's side, although the paternal line is usually given stronger consideration. As already alluded above, while as Christians we appreciate our close kinship connections, church and civil leadership appointments must be the prerogative of God in accordance with His revealed Word. God's will transcends all human kinship.
- **The division of labour by gender.** In many Sudanese societies women take care of all domestic tasks including child rearing. In rural areas it is traditional for women to work in the fields as well. While a woman's life in town was traditionally more restricted, especially among the northern Muslim majority, it is increasingly common to see females employed outside the home in urban areas. However, statistics show that about 29 percent of the paid workforce is female. In many of our churches today, the role of

women in church leadership is still a hot debate. Some have gone ahead and ordained women in key leadership roles. May we tread carefully in this path. God's will both respects and transcends gender. We must follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit in accordance with a good understanding of the Word of God.

- **The status of men and women in society.** To a large extent, Sudanese society is a patriarchal society, in which women are generally accorded a lesser status than men. From the age of forty or so a woman's life becomes less constrained. For example in some tribes only when a woman becomes of age (symbolised by grey hair) is she equal to a man.¹⁰ Men and women live largely separate lives, and tend to socialise primarily with members of their own sex. Men often meet in clubs to talk and play cards, while women usually gather in the home. This is reflected in child rearing and educational practices. In many communities boys and girls are largely raised separately. Both sexes are divided into age-specific groups. There are celebrations to mark a group's graduation from one stage to the next. For boys, the transition from childhood to manhood is marked in some societies by a circumcision ceremony, while in others it is with tattoo markings. Whatever a person's status, the church must ensure that God's Word is above culture and judges culture. Christians recognise and respect culture, but where culture clashes with Christian principle, the Christian principle must take precedence. All cultural practices must be evaluated in the light of scripture. Christians are called to be different people.¹¹

Leadership, how it is executed and transferred, plays a vital role throughout the scriptures. The transition from Moses to Joshua is one biblical model of successful leadership transition. There are few leaders who finish as well as Moses and Joshua. May God help us to prayerfully follow their example: remaining true to God's Word and relevant to cultural context, (in that order!).

Discussion guide

Using this chapter and Scriptures quoted:

1. What are the weakness in churches/groups that fail to plan for a change of leadership?

¹⁰ The Bible teaches the equality of man and woman. Like a lock and a key woman and man are different to each other. But also like a lock and a key woman and man need each other, with their differences, in order to fully function. 1 Peter 3:7; 1 Corinthians 12:22-25.

¹¹ 1 Peter 2:11-12; Matthew 5:13-16; 1 Corinthians 9:19-22.

Why is it essential that they should plan for change?

2. "If you do not change, change will change you". Explain your understanding of this quote.
3. What leadership transition examples from family life or from traditional society could be copied by the church/Christian organisation today?

List the strong and the weak points of each example?

4. Compare and contrast your answers to Question 3 with *examples from the Bible* of leadership change.
5. How do Bible passages like 1 Timothy 4:11-16; Titus 2:6-8; 1 Timothy 6:11-21; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1-11 impact on young aspiring leaders and also on older established leaders?
In a transition conflict which side can appeal to Scripture?
Which Scriptures should be considered?
What are the dangers in using only some passages and not others?

6. When Paul called Timothy to join his team "the brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of Timothy", Acts 16:1-5. What do you think this phrase means?
What would Paul be looking for in a new recruit?

7. From the gospels consider how Jesus enrolled and prepared successors.

List as many points for today's Christian leaders to copy as you can, with Bible references.