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Introduction

The indigenous church model serves as a set of principles to gauge the maturity of a church within a context (Hodges 1976, 3). Such a framework draws upon Scripture for its foundation and proposes independent, God-reliant faith communities (Hodges 1976, 58). As researched by Rufus Anderson, Henry Venn (Shenk 1981, 168), then John Nevius (Nevius 1899, 21-23), and presented by Melvin Hodges (1976, 22), the model contains a three-self formula of governing, propagating, and supporting which correlates to the characteristics of the early church. Further inquiry into the original three selves produced a supplementary three: theologizing, missionizing, and caring (Hiebert 1986, 195; Newberry 2005, 111-114). Hans Kasdorf (1979: 85) compiled a list of twelve selves as “open-ended,” allowing several recent additions this past decade (Payne 2009, 37). Contextualization seems to be an assumed component within the indigenous church (hereafter IC) model. A lack of metric allows for a lessened emphasis on the element of indigeneity the model seeks. As an attempt, this article describes self-localizing and self-localization, and its implications for the indigenous church model.

The Self-Indigenous Church

The strength of the IC model also serves as a weakness. An IC can become qualified as indigenous without external assistance. Further, *self* implies self-reliance within the organization. An inherent self-characteristic of independence may allow churches to become closed circuits without interaction with those in their locality. The self-governing church may develop healthy regulations without interference from outside of its organization. The self-propagating church may be able to start other campuses in nearby communities without a significant population from each locality. The faith community may also be able to raise funds among themselves to fulfill the self-supporting aspect of the IC. Per the formula, a faith community can exemplify the main

three principles and even the additional three selfs of the IC model to achieve the goal of indigeneity (Hodges 1976, chap. 3). Hesselgrave accentuates the necessity for localization by posing an insight: while adhering to a three-self formula, an indigenous church, can “still be more or less unrelated to the soil in which it must grow” (2000, 366). By this definition, a church can exist to itself without any self determined connection to the context. An IC must interact with those in their proximity if abiding by the example of first-century faith communities.

Localization in Scripture

Scripture records specific experiences and questions people posed to the early church. Consequently, believers considered their model and then determined a response that better represented Jesus Christ. Local experiences catalyze the process of self-localization, which includes critical contextualization of the present form of the selfs. The resulting goal is that those in the locality understand the reason for a faith community, whether they join it or not. Illustration of self-localization within the progression of the early church provides insight into how the contemporary church, no matter their global location, can follow suit.

Self-Care

The early church became known in their locality for their ministries of healing and deliverance “among the people” (Acts 3:6-8; 5:12-16). However, at certain moments, because of its structures, the church did not address the needs of local people. Acts 6:1-6 displays how the church neglected Hellenistic widows alongside Hebraic widows. Schnabel shares that no “social or theological differences considering the two groups of widows” existed (2012, 329). Such lack of consideration and engagement by those in their faith community reveals an opportunity for new forms of self-care and governance to meet the internal, local needs. To regain unity, the apostles employed nineteen Jewish leaders with Greek names to serve the community (Keener 2012, 1287; Fitzmyer 1998, 344-345).

Another account of ecclesial growth regarding self-care concerns Tabitha, a Jewish woman “of special rank” (Acts 9:36-43). Known for “always doing good and helping the poor,” she declined in health until she died (Keener 2012, 1716). In response, the disciples sent two men to gather Peter, who prayed and called for her to rise. Tabitha was presented to the mourners with the news of the truth of her healing, which was “known all over Joppa” (Schnabel 2012, 470). The expanding self-care aspect of the church challenged those in the locality to reconsider their theology. Their self-

missionizing shifted as believers sent fellow workers to assist the needs of the people. The resulting actions of the church compelled “many people” (Acts 9:42) to believe in the Lord.

Self-Support

The early church was in the habit of selling “property and possessions to give to anyone who had need” (Acts 2:45), exemplifying a characteristic of self-support (Acts 2:45; Schnabel 2012, 182). Acts 4 recounts how those in the community “shared everything they had” with “no needy persons among them” (Acts 4:32-37). F. F. Bruce proposes that their communal life allowed a “sense of spiritual unity” that “was exceptionally active” (1988, 74). Though diaspora would challenge the continuity of this community, the generosity and care that served as a hallmark of the behavior of Christians would soon follow their dispersion throughout the region, as in the case of Tabitha.

Localities, such as towns and cities, take on the characteristics of the inhabitants. In effect, believers in other localities could then recognize and assist the characteristic needs of the people far away from their own experience. There exists a progression of how the church learns and is understood in a locality, now stretching into assisting other churches with their localities (Barnett 1997). Giving across the Greco-Roman world was not uncommon since some charitable initiatives were present in the Greco-Roman world (Longenecker 2010, 66). Thus, Paul’s collection for people experiencing poverty in Jerusalem was not entirely rare in its form. Yet, the unique motivation for such an “illustrative model of his theology” differed from the obligated giving for the poor in their locality (Martin 1985, 251). Participation in this collection was for a “nonlocal” or “extra-local” entity (Kloppenborg 2019, 263). The churches of Macedonia sent a “voluntary” offering to Jerusalem to help the widows and orphans there (2 Cor 8:3-5; Longenecker 2010, 186; Verbrugge and Harris 2008).

Paul notes his desire that the Corinthians would “also excel in the grace of giving” (2 Cor 8:7). Further, Paul hopes that the church in Corinth might both care for their “brothers and sisters” in their immediate sphere and adopt the concern, devotion, and volunteerism of the Macedonians (2 Cor. 8:8; Barnett 1997; Furnish 1984, 413; Meeks 1983, 89; Seifrid 2014). Accounting for people not physically present in one’s “face-to-face” locality serves as a sign of interactive care, “an evident feature of the development of human society” (Giddens 1979, 204). Extending care beyond the local would express ‘Gentile solidarity’ with the Judean Christians. Such an “interchange” in partnership of supporting and caring for one another beyond one’s locality, in the knowledge of a situation in another locality, seems a valid progression of the self-localization concept

to flow into cross-cultural support, caring, and mission (Garland 1999, 369; Seifrid 2014).

Self-Missionizing

Missionizing contains the fundamental work of proclaiming the gospel cross-culturally (Schnabel 2012, 613). The Greco-Roman context of the time provided opportunities to speak with rural pagans, city-dwellers, followers of Zeus, and worshippers of Artemis (Acts 17:16-34; 19). Paul, Phillip, Prisca, Aquila, and others spoke “boldly for the Lord,” “told . . . of the good news of Jesus,” “preach[ed] the gospel,” and “explained . . . the way of God more adequately” in multiple, differing host contexts (Acts 8:4-8, 35; 14:1-7; 18:26). Their missional way of living removes the clutter of a monolithic “mission-less theology and confession” of Christianity while accentuating the potential for believers of all local churches to be sent cross-culturally (Kärkkäinen 2021, 168).

The church at Antioch displays the fundamental capacity to set apart global workers from their people to communicate with different localities (Acts 13:2). The newly formed faith community, largely Gentile in populous, trusted as the Spirit led them in the endeavor while also recognizing the need of people who had not yet heard the gospel (Polhill 1992, 290). Such believers shared about Christ through messages tailored to fit the ears of the local people, inevitably leading to new local gatherings of disciples (Peterson 2009, 280).

Self-Propagation

Following the characteristic of self-propagation, where disciples make disciples, contextualization helps to make sense of the gospel to local people (Banks 2020, 100). The New Testament records multiple accounts of new disciples following Jesus across various localities. Their social meeting places ranged from house assemblies to gatherings at businesses, in tents, and by riversides. They retained unity with other churches through an “enduring relationship” in Christ (Adams 2013, 49, 142; Banks 2020, 39). The believers did not demand that local people adopt a vastly different way of meeting but adapted to the context. It seems significant that their social gatherings be locally accessible.

Self-Theologizing

The disciples learned about Jesus by posing questions about his methods and ideas amid their shortcomings (Mark 4:10, 10:10, 9:28, Acts 1:6; Lane 1974). In like manner, once the Spirit-led believers established groups in context, people in their localities posed

questions to the faith communities (Acts 2:7, 8, 12, 37; 3:3; 4:7, 16; 7:7). Questions posed to the early church resulted in the believers explaining the words and teachings of Jesus, highlighting his fulfillment of Jewish Scripture. In essence, they theologized. The self-theologizing early church learned about God's inclusion of the Gentiles in his salvific plan via Peter's encounter at Cornelius' house (10:47-48).

Spirit-led meetings throughout Acts 10 removed remaining doubt that the local Gentiles could be equal parts of the larger church (Keener 2012, 1813). Flett (2016, 258) contends, "The resulting theological conclusion that 'God shows no partiality' becomes decisive for the Jerusalem council." Acts 11 and 15 emphasize the readiness of the Gentiles to receive the gospel and the resistance of the Jewish people, which culminates in a theological debate (Ladd 1993, 239). The presence and response of Gentile believers in their localities challenged their theology, which then affected their governing to "not make it difficult for Gentiles who are turning to God" (Acts 15:19). Gentiles were not expected to respond to the gospel as they did—in far greater numbers than their Jewish neighbors (Acts 15:15-18; Bruce 1988, 294; Peterson 2009, 432).

Additionally, the Jerusalem Council's (Acts 15) decision to appropriate some forms of living and to remove Jewish forms of identity displays a result of the localization process. "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things" (Acts 15:28-29).

The development of the IC stems from interaction with local questions and experiences. Simultaneous lessons about theologizing, governing, propagating, supporting, and caring would affect the early church as they became aware of those in their locality. Stephen Bevans (2002, 92) contends that "the outsider . . . has some part to play in constructing a local theology, even though it may be quite limited and auxiliary." If contextualizing the gospel into a locality is a priority, this characteristic of the church is best preserved through an additional self principle.

Localization in Concept

Contextualizing the gospel into the host cultural context is a fundamental value of the indigenous church. A goal of the faith community is to communicate Christ where the "forms [are] local [and the] meanings [are] Christian" to construct an "appropriate church" model (Kraft, 1996, 377). As a central concern of missiology, contextualization

focuses on the “forms and symbols sufficiently familiar to a particular culture” to “maximize understanding and acceptance of the gospel in that culture” (Netland 2001, 272). The indigenous church aims to enact the appropriation of such forms according to a place and time (Bevans, 2009, 25). The term self-localization emphasizes the need for ongoing contextualization by the faith community.

Defining Local

The “local sociocultural contexts” where “people live [their] everyday lives” serve as the boundaries for a localized experience (Hiebert 2008, 246, 247). One may encounter people of differing ethnicities, languages, thoughts, and traditions (Bakke and Hart 1987, 138). Though living in close proximity to neighbors, the peoples of a geographic region may carry out distinctly different living patterns from others. Further, a perceived cultural expression of a group of people adds to a generalized characteristic of a locality. “Localization” serves as a chosen name for this particular self (see further Berger 2014, 20; Halebian 1979, 96; Hiebert 2008, 249; and Schreiter 1985, 8).

Whatever the terms used to understand peoples of a local place, there will be an ever-shifting lexicon to identify social phenomena (Buswell, 1978, 93-94). In one such attempt at categorization, Berger’s “degrees of indigeneity” consider three categories held by those in the locality with their characteristics spanning from “relational” with an implicit “sense of ‘local’” to a “less relational identity” while still retaining local roles (2014, 31). Amid these categories, the containers of “local” include all people of a geographic area, regardless of their participation or role. By such a framework, anyone can participate in a locality, relating in differing ways to the world and their immediate neighbors. Berger’s most pronounced category of what it is to be local includes that the inhabitants are implicitly “indigenous” to the place and that, regarding diversity, no ethnicity is primary (2014, 23). As a result of Berger’s research, “local” serves well to operationalize a “contextualized model that functions within the framework of social and spiritual mores of the host country” (Newberry, 2005, 95).

Local in Proximity and Time

Scripture shows how the early church developed through regarding the host peoples’ geography and cultural symbols. Self-designation of identity, such as “the saints” in Scripture, shows boundaries through which believers understand themselves within their culture. Yet, such self-designation did not negate their actions from being understood by those outside of their community (Trebilco 2012, 128,129). Jesus restates the Levitical care intended to extend beyond the Jewish community by emphasizing loving one’s neighbor wherever one is located (Lev 19:18; Luke 10:25-37). The parable

of the Good Samaritan serves as an example of how a traveler considers someone else as a “neighbor” in their immediate locality (Garland 2011, 442). Believers “orient to others” in word and deed to best acquaint the faith community with the people in their everyday lives (Kurylo 2013, 367). Again, *localization* considers understanding those in proximity. Flett (2016, 250) recounts Andrew Walls’ theology of Christian history as “bound to the local appropriation of the gospel, and so its translation into local forms. The church apostolic is the church historically and so culturally pluriform.”

Lukan literature also shows church growth amid a host culture’s geography and symbols. Hesselgrave (2000, 367) contends that historical church polity tends to reflect the context of their “inception,” leading to different expressions of leadership. Temporal boundaries bind people in any locality. As people change and their behavior changes, so do the characteristics assigned to the locality. Forms designed to serve peoples in the past may not prove helpful to reach those in a present, contemporary locality. Localization serves as an engine to continually contextualize the indigenous church, considering the understandings current in the context. Myopically honoring a past synchronic indigeneity may become an obstacle to approaching people in the present locality with their “symbolic meanings” of forms that “change with time” (Netland 2001, 329). People live as “distinct communities” without significantly merging the global and local (Hiebert 2008, 250). To this end, self-localization serves well as a principle for the indigenous church.

Localization as a Process

Three components in the localization process can assist in connecting a faith community to a context: listening, dialogue, and a localizing question. Believers who sense a responsibility to start a faith community will find that a more robust understanding of the context and people in their locality results from taking on these three components in their practices of grounding a theoretical contextualization. The first two steps, listening and dialogue, are intertwined, while the localizing question reflects how the locality understands the forms and functions of the church.

Listening and Dialogue

Getting to know people in a locality demands an investment of time. Church planter Steve Pike asserts, “The key activity in the first three to six months will be listening to the neighborhood residents” (Pike, 2022, 115). In each of their writings, Warren Newberry and Tim Keller assert that focusing on assessing the needs and

understandings within a locality can lead to a “relevant” model (Pike, 2022, 115; Keller, 2012, loc 3261). Keller agrees with the importance of needs as a connection point: “Ultimately, the most important source for learning will be the hours and hours spent in close relationships to people, listening to them carefully” (Keller, 2012, loc 3223). When the believing community meets the needs of a locality, the community will understand the functions and intentions of the church.

Pike’s team draws a correlation between the number of meaningful conversations with people and the connection to the worshipping community (Pike, 2023). Gateway Fellowship Church in San Antonio challenged their team to have twelve hundred meaningful conversations so that “people knew their names and other people knew theirs” (2008). Discussions ensure that the believer’s social and theological presuppositions become informed by interaction with the locality. At the beginning of their campus ministry in Copenhagen, Denmark, Chuck and Sally Haavik found that asking multiple students about their dreams for their lives led to meaningful connections (personal conversation 2018).

Listening and dialogue inform the missionary about the needs of the people in the context. Consequently, assumptions and pre-understandings about a culture used to construct a theoretical contextualized approach can be corrected to live out a life as a believer in context more faithfully. To communicate more effectively, Rod Carlson of Oak Hills Church in Eagan, MN, implemented a “Parish Response Group” to assist in identifying words used in sermons that may impede a local person’s reception to hearing a message about Jesus Christ (2016, 97). Further, localization emphasizes interdependence with other churches and believers in their locality, minimizing a faith community adopting characteristics of unhealthy independence and becoming closed circuits without interaction with other believers. Without an aptitude to listen and dialogue with their neighbors, believers attempting localization would be in danger of contextualizing their faith community to satisfy their own perception, vision, or church culture rather than to connect with their locality.

The Self-Localizing Question

Along with listening and dialogue, contextualization remains a necessary discipline of the church as “the gospel cannot find expression apart from cultural form” (Flett, 2016, 246). As the church translates itself into a host context, assessment of its forms and functions must be allowed as a part of the maturing indigenous church. The proposed question catalyzes a contextualization process within the faith community to critique its current forms and functions, seeking a scripturally faithful yet culturally understood

expression (see figure below). *Is the reason (logos) for the faith community understood by those who reside as part of the local context?* The question critiques the current iteration of the relatability of the church to its locality in this process, serving as the engine for all self principles to mature and progress.



Mirroring the reevaluation of the early church in Acts 6, methodologies such as Paul Hiebert’s critical contextualization investigate present cultural forms and functions of spiritual expression through Scripture in light of the surrounding locality as an extension of the primary question posed above (1987, 186-187). This “constant check on the church” serves a similar purpose to Anthony Giddens’ theory of structuration, where a recursive action led by change agents leads to transformation throughout time (1984, 25; Hiebert, 1987, 191). The early church critiqued present, assumed practices and forms of their faith community in culture to express “a pure faith and an essential gospel... in an indigenous garment” (Tippett

1979, 401). While their learning may begin with one function, other functions are affected as the church establishes a faithful orthopraxy to serve the locality.

Implications of Self-Localization

A faith community has the potential to be planted as a campus, outpost, or church, but still fail to address the needs or understanding of the neighbors around it. In all contexts, the local church has the potential to be “indigenous according to the classical definition and still be more or less unrelated to the soil in which it must grow” (Hesselgrave et al., 2000, 366). Similarly, Tim Keller writes that a church might have practiced theoretical contextualization but still not have “adapted” ministry to the local culture (2012, loc 2488). Lamin Sanneh notes the realization of the early believers that “God’s impartial action in all cultures” would have specific expressions as they shared

equality before God (Sanneh, 2015, 53). The mission to establish the church in all contexts includes proclaiming the gospel cross-culturally (Schnabel, 2012, 613).

Localization in Partnership

By working together in localization, local believers and missionaries avoid the pitfalls of allowing uncritical translation of the gospel from the home culture of the worker while minimizing syncretism by the host culture (Hiebert, 1987, 185; Shaw, 1988, 207). Kurylo (2013, 282) describes “intracultural variability” as the ability of global workers to recognize variations of a specific form across cultures, posing a critical question during the contextualization process. However, believers must earn trust. Perceptions exist about how visitors and newcomers to culture can “live in their bubbles without having much interaction with their overseas counterparts, much less the locals” (Livermore, 2015, 61). They must make visible their commitment and ties from one church to another, with a “voice from the outside” to provide “broad perspective and critique” (Hiebert, 1986, 230). Flett asserts that “African Christianity will not ‘mature’ into a form corresponding to the Western experience but will continue to develop its forms corresponding to its questions” (2016, 245). Missionaries must faithfully attempt to address the questions of the host context while remaining aware of both their home and host contexts (Hiebert, 1986, 229). Resulting expressions from this partnership must reflect the host context, not the missionary’s home experience, lest the faith community become unrelatable to the locality. A considerable measure of participation by local believers and missionaries together leads to the “acquisition of adequate understanding about life” (Nida, 1975, 270). On an individual level, “no person is an individual ‘de facto,’ that is, capable of fulfilling God’s will and mission by his/herself” (Koeshall, 2012, 253). In isolation, it cannot reflect the universality and diversity of the Body of Christ, nor grow into maturity” (Tippett, 1987, 92).

Reglamento Local

Contextualization was a primary concern for Melvin Hodges and those who worked in similar contexts. Church leaders of El Salvador implement a local rule (*reglamento local*) to serve as guidelines in the faithful practice of the believers in the context. Realizing the limitations of how *local* was understood, believers and missionaries decided that a church would need to exist within walking distance of local people. In their services, they had their own songbook and service schedule. “Meetings would be held on Sunday afternoons and not mornings, as the early parts of the day were for going to market for the week” (Rance, 2023). Rance adds, “the church is one church, the body of Christ, but each local congregation is unique. The seed remains the same, but the distinct soils

produce diverse expressions within the broader community of faith” (Rance, 2017, 186). *Reglamento local* ensures that a church remains relevant to the flow of life within a locality. The *reglamento local* would be reassessed every three years to ensure a faith community’s adaptation to an ever-shifting context. Localization to a time and place connects expressions of faith to the local people to provide an efficient reception of the gospel rather than allowing a dissonance in understanding to become an obstacle.

Urban Setting

Upon arriving in New York in 1989, Tim Keller began investigating the demographics of New York to frame how he could contextualize the gospel to the city (Keller, 2012, loc 3221). As he prepared sermons, Keller recognized a disconnect, so he dialogued with the people of the locality, learning about what would work best. To better understand the locality, it seemed necessary for this family also not to live outside of the community they would pastor. As Collin Hansen notes, “The Kellers were *in* the city if not entirely *of* the city (2023, 192). Keller proposed that a faith community should meet local needs in a “sacrificial” manner to communicate that “believers are motivated more by love and not a desire to accrue power” through conversion growth (2018, 197). One perceived need in New York City was the lack of community (Mattingly, 2023). Michael Green, an inspiration to Keller, argued: “Churches that live for themselves die by themselves. If our evangelism is to be effective, the church must be concerned to meet the surrounding need” (1992, 101; Hansen, 2023, 156). In its context, the local church tells the surrounding community about the character of Christ in a way that they would understand.

Keller’s work moved from philosophy to praxis when he realized that personal connection and recognizing people’s giftings might not be achieved because of the size of a larger church (Schrock, 2023). Keller and the team recognized the importance of splitting their large church community into “three neighborhood churches” to better serve the locality (Keller, 2015). Keller developing a localizing understanding of New York by looking at the neighborhoods within the boroughs. By referring to neighborhoods a “slices of pizza” with diverse toppings was a way to communicate as a New Yorker to New Yorkers (Keller, 2012, loc 3737).

Responding to Bretherton’s question “How do we build a common life in places characterized by deep religious and cultural diversity?” (2015, 291), Keller asserted that “Christians cannot think that their role in life is strictly to build up the church, as crucial as that is. As neighbors and citizens, they must also work sacrificially for the common life and good” (Keller, 2018, 161). By this, one can suppose that a localized

approach includes listening and dialogue; however, acting to meet needs reveals the motivation or reason for the faith community.

Rural Setting

Josiah Tonder serves as pastor in the rural community of Long Prairie, Minnesota. Upon arriving in 2019, his family encountered a robust Latino community in the schools, businesses, grocery stores, and local everyday life. Out of curiosity, Tonder studied the town's demographics (population 3,697) and found that nearly 50 percent of the community were broadly Latino (MNAOG, 2023). Observing the disparity between the population of the churches and the community, he noted, "Our church doesn't look like our city" (Tonder, 2023). Tonder initiated opportunities to listen to and dialogue with Spanish-speaking pastors and the people of Long Prairie to grasp how the church was not understanding or meeting the needs of Long Prairie.

The greatest obstacle for their congregation would involve addressing the language barrier within the church.

With great intentionality, Tonder began sharing his vision in words and practice, by shifting their services and expressions toward Spanish speakers in the community. This change challenged the congregation as they moved from being monolingual to bilingual in worship. Worship songs were sung in both Spanish and English and the sermon, given in Spanish or English, would also be translated (MNAOG, 2023). Communicating through a physical symbol that showed that the church understood its community, they invested significantly to build a soccer pitch on their property (Tonder, 2023).

Though Tonder knew people in his community from various cultural backgrounds, the culture of the church did not match those relationships. In this transformation, the church became known by the community. This example follows Pike's "leading metric" conversations (2023). The noted churches in El Salvador, New York City, and Long Prairie, MN, exhibit the three elements of a localization process, which continually pose: *Is the reason (logos) for the faith community understood by those who reside as part of the local context?*

Localization and Syncretism

Self-localization can help the church to safeguard against syncretism. Robert Priest writes that "a mission church with indigenous leadership, making full use of local cultural forms, and doing its theologizing is likely to create a form of Christian faith that more deeply satisfies . . . [than other religious practices]" (2013, 314). Kevin

Vanhoozer (2006, 103) purports that “syncretism stems from an assumption that all religions and philosophies are ultimately about the same thing.” Hesselgrave adds, “Syncretism is sometimes induced by underestimating the uniqueness of the Christian faith while overestimating the validity of competing faiths” (2006, 72). The early church would face Gnosticism and other ideologies leaving it at risk of being “subsumed as an accessory of the dominant cultural systems of the age” (Sanneh, 2015, 54). To gain relatability, believers of host contexts may allow the positive aspects of other spiritual experiences to eclipse their expression.

Both mature and new faith communities will benefit from working with missionaries who share a concern for their locality. The unique and transcultural nature of Christianity poses a challenge to followers of other belief systems. As the gospel is introduced into a culture, those already partaking in other belief systems in the host culture may attempt to negotiate and incorporate Jesus or Christian meaning into existing forms of worship (Hiebert and Shaw, 2000, 194). The external perspective of the missionary, which presupposes the permeability of social groups, assists in preventing Jesus Christ from becoming subsumed into other belief systems. Believers help new disciples navigate liminality when separating the meaning of their old belief systems in contextualization (Meeks, 1983, 88). Moreover, without missionaries as a part of localization, the translation of Jesus Christ into different cultures may result in him being adopted as a Bodhisattva within Buddhism, an avatar of Vishnu in Hinduism, a guru to the Sikh, and a wise minimalist to the secular humanist (Barker, 2005, 23).

As part of the center or periphery of a faith community, missionaries listen and dialogue with the faith community in what Schreiter and Bevens call the synthetic model of forming theology (Schreiter 1985, 22; Bevens 2002, 93). This dialogue does not terminate in the “accommodation” and summation of the most accepted parts of the world’s faiths as John Hick advocates (Hesselgrave and Rommen, 2000, 151). Instead, dialogue proves helpful where the meanings of Christianity are treated as truth in the critique of present forms while developing an “ever-expanding” awareness of the factors involved (Schreiter 1985, 20). Both listening and dialogue ensure that those in a locality fluently dialogue in “openness” to understand the gospel (Bevens, 2002, 93).

Suppose the social contract of a context validates gatherings of eight to ten people as the primary way of growing in a relationship according to the host culture (Rousseau, 1920). It may be best practice to design gatherings that converge with the present sociological pathways of how ideas travel within a context. It may seem odd to Paul and the early church that believers commute to another city or neighborhood, leaving their

unknown neighbors well behind, to populate a new local church campus in another locality. In this circumstance, though this church may grow numerically and be considered successful, there is no evidence to suggest whether this church is meeting the needs or understanding the people in their locality. If localization is not emphasized as a characteristic of a mature church, the believers' neighbors and the local faith community become overlooked.

Just as missionaries may potentially set up or transmit a faith community into a host context without meeting the people of the locality or addressing their needs, church planters in all contexts, western included, can potentially do the same. Missionaries may not be welcome based on how the gospel was initially transmitted. If a form were prescribed upon a culture, without the challenge of localization, the structure would smack of an imported culture. We must endeavor toward "mission as *translation*" rather than "mission as *transmission*" (Johnson, 2022, 29). The patriarch Jacob gained his identity after his wrestling match with the Lord (Gen 32:22-32). The challenging work of localization provides a more apparent identity and new relatability for the church in context.

Conclusion

This article proposes self-localization as a necessary characteristic of a mature indigenous church. Early church contextualization practices showed their missionizing efforts, care for others, support, disciple-making aptitude, and ability to critique their theology. The catalyzing question encourages the translation of the faith community while considering the present forms of the meaning of a context. The engagement of first-century believers with the peoples of their locality challenges the contemporary church to make sense of the gospel for the hearer. The ultimate localization stems from the example of Jesus, who humbled himself, entered our earthly context, took on the form of a servant, and communicated in a way that we would understand. He became local and challenges the contemporary church to do likewise.

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