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## The Prophet Elijah as an Agent of Change for Community Development

Lollo Zo Nantenaina

*Andrews University*, [zonanten@andrews.edu](mailto:zonanten@andrews.edu)

Joel Raveloharimisy

*Andrews University*, [raveloha@andrews.edu](mailto:raveloha@andrews.edu)

Karen McWilliams

*Andrews University*, [Kjohnsonmcwilliams@gmail.com](mailto:Kjohnsonmcwilliams@gmail.com)

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*LOLLO ZO NANTENAINA, JOEL RAVELOHARIMISY,  
KAREN MCWILLIAMS*  
**THE PROPHET ELISHA AS AN AGENT  
OF CHANGE FOR COMMUNITY  
DEVELOPMENT**

Modern Christian leaders can become involved as agents of change in their communities, specifically in ways demonstrated by principles of community development seen in the Old Testament prophet Elisha’s miracles. According to Christ’s teachings (Luke 12:32-34), the mission of Christians is not just going to church every weekend and participating in internal church programs; it involves taking care of the needs of the community outside the church as well. 2 Kings 1-8 details the Prophet Elisha’s actions as he dealt with different issues that occurred in his community—some involving only individuals and others affecting the whole community.

The mission entrusted to Christian leaders is holistic, focused not only on meeting the spiritual needs of people but also on helping to meet people’s physical, material and emotional needs as well. Christian leaders often fail to accomplish this holistic mission, neglecting the physical needs of their community and sometimes erroneously believing that aiding community members with their physical problems is not what God has called them to do. A survey of U.S. pastors conducted by World Vision concerning their priorities revealed that 79% listed “worship in the highest priority category; 57 percent, evangelism; 55 percent, children’s ministry; and 47 percent, discipleship programs. Just 18 percent said that ‘helping poor and disadvantaged people overseas’ was of ‘highest priority’” (Stearns, 2010, p. 185). And, as churches so often find, “poor and disadvantaged people” are not all overseas; many are

Lollo Zo Nantenaina, MA in Theology (Adventist University of France), graduated with a Master of Science in Community and International Development from Andrews University. [zonanten@andrews.edu](mailto:zonanten@andrews.edu)/  
[manoalollo@yahoo.fr](mailto:manoalollo@yahoo.fr)

Joel Raveloharimisy, MBA, Ph.D., is the Director of the Community and International Development Program at Andrews University. [raveloha@andrews.edu](mailto:raveloha@andrews.edu)

Karen McWilliams, MA, is an adjunct professor in the Department of English at Andrews University.  
[kjohnsonmcwilliams@gmail.com](mailto:kjohnsonmcwilliams@gmail.com)

right next to churches whose members can learn principles that will help their congregations to act as Elisha did, as an agent of help and healing.

## **The Mission of Elisha**

Elisha, the son of Shaphat, a farmer at Abelmeholah in the Jordan Valley south of the Sea of Galilee, lived in the ninth century B.C. in the kingdom of Israel. Before becoming the successor of the prophet Elijah the Tishbite (1 Kings 19:15-21), Elisha worked as Elijah's servant for some years. 1 Kings 19:19 says that one day, while Elisha was working in the field with a wooden plough drawn by oxen, Elijah came up to him and threw his cloak on him as a symbolic call, and Elisha followed the older man (Zucker, 2013).

Subsequently, Elisha took over Elijah's mission of standing against the religious and moral decline in Israel at that time, especially against the cult of Baals. The kingdom of Israel was particularly corrupt at that time under King Ahab; when Ahab died, his sons, first Ahaziah and then Joram, succeeded him and continued to do evil (2 Kings 3:2-3). As a result of these kings' disobedience to God, many problems occurred in the kingdom that impacted the life of the population: famine (2 Kings 4:38-44, 6:25), war between nations (2 Kings 3, 6:8-22, 6:24-33, and 7:1-20), poverty (2 Kings 4:1-7, 6:42-44), sickness (2 Kings 5:1-16), abuse (2 Kings 2:23-25), and injustice (2 Kings 6:26-31).

In response to these problems, Elisha became an agent of change, someone who took stock of the problem and, in response, effected some changes that improved the lives of individuals and communities. Just as Elisha saw and met the needs of people in his time, modern Christian leaders and their congregations have the responsibility to confront the general spiritual and moral decline in society and aid suffering people (Dorn, 1996; "Protecting the Abused and Neglected Child," 2012).

## **Issues That Need to Be Addressed by the Church Community**

Currently people are threatened by different development problems, including war, financial crisis, fluctuating oil prices, climate change, famine, and many more issues that affect the well-being of people on both the local and national level (Evans, 2010), leaving many local communities facing seemingly insurmountable challenges such as limited education, housing, food, and jobs (Robinson & Green, 2011).

Spiritual leaders face the challenge of joining the effort being made to reach the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) proposed by the United Nations: to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; to achieve universal primary education; to promote gender equality and empower women; to

reduce child mortality; to improve maternal health; to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; to ensure environmental sustainability; and to form a global partnership for development (United Nations, 2014). The United Nations hopes to see these goals reached in 2015, but since some post-MDG programs already exist, to get involved in such programs is a privilege for spiritual leaders who seek to change and improve their community.

The 10 principles that follow are ones that Elisha demonstrated and that Christian leaders can adopt in their mission to cities and communities: to be prepared, to be committed, to be influenced by the Holy Spirit, to stand firm in their identity, to build trust, to value and encourage partnership, to be accountable, to have an aptitude in problem solving, to have faith, and to be diligent.

### *First Principle: To Be Prepared*

In order to receive the double portion of power that God had given to Elijah, Elisha had to prepare for his mission (2 Kings 2:12-15), to let nothing distract him from following his master so that he was there, ready to receive this power when God took Elijah. What looked like a disaster as the great prophet was taken from him actually resulted in Elisha's receiving double the power that Elijah had, not only because God was willing for this to happen, but also because Elisha was prepared to receive it.

To be prepared is to have the ability to respond in any given situation that one may encounter and to handle it calmly. Preparation is very important because it is one of the first steps to allow the leaders to get ready to change their behavior and plan so they can achieve their goals. In addition, being prepared is a characteristic that will help agents of change as they encounter the many surprises they will have to tackle. One way that modern leaders can be prepared is to take advantage of any opportunity to become well trained (White, 1915), as Elisha did by becoming Elijah's student and availing himself of the mentoring of the older man.

Although people may have talents, to get training almost always helps them to utilize those talents more effectively, so to be mentored is almost always necessary (Aguilera, 2006). Velada, Caetano, Michel, Lyons, and Kavanagh (2007) explain that training will help leaders to improve their knowledge of their field of work and enhance their ability to serve in different ways, as well as to prepare them for their future mission. People can attain this training by attending different workshops or classes and gleaning information from the Internet. Also, once they themselves are educated, Christian leaders have the opportunity to empower and train other people inside and outside their communities in order to prepare others to develop

spiritually, physically, and mentally and to enhance their native skills (Martin, 2008).

### *Second Principle: To Be Committed*

Every time people called upon Elisha to intervene in a problem in his community, he was willing to serve and to resolve the problem; such a commitment was foundational to his mission reported in the book of 2 Kings. Even when he was not respected, as was the case with King Joram in 2 Kings 3:13-14, he was still willing to provide a solution. Elisha definitely demonstrated commitment throughout his mission, especially at the beginning, when the time came for Elijah to leave and Elisha was present, not distracted by things that had nothing to do with his mission (2 Kings 2:6). To be committed to the mission that God has assigned to Christian leaders is one of the key components of being a successful agent of change. Eric Wadud (2013), writing on the Community Tool Box website, says the following:

People who are committed are the ones who don't take discouragement seriously—they don't give up. They set an example for those who don't have the confidence or experience to go through the hard times and hold out for the rewards of success. (Chapter 14, Section 5)

Sometimes Christian leaders get involved in work that, though it brings them money and honor, may have nothing to do with their calling and may in fact create a conflict of interest that hinders them from concentrating on correctly accomplishing their mission (White, 1915). In prayer, Christian leaders ask for God's guidance in seeking that task which He wants them to accomplish; no matter how hard and discouraging that task may prove to be, leaders commit themselves to accomplishing it for God.

### *Third Principle: To Be Influenced by the Holy Spirit*

Elisha accepted his mission to be used by the Holy Spirit, and the stories of Gehazi taking gifts from Naaman (2 Kings 5:2, 5-27) and of the Arameans being blinded (2 Kings 6:8-20) show how the Holy Spirit gave him insights that ordinary people did not have. Some of the miracles Elisha performed, such as that of healing the bad water in Jericho (2 Kings 2:19-22), not only aided people in need but also illustrated a spiritual lesson. The case of the water illustrates the purifying work of the Holy Spirit in people's lives just as salting the water purified it.

Most importantly, the Holy Spirit needs to guide leaders as agents of change, lest they merely follow their own agendas. Leaders are role models, and when filled with the Spirit, Christian leaders can encourage others to receive God's guidance (Hanna, 2006; White, 1915). An agent of change has

the privilege of setting an example for others so they can modify their behavior and in turn help to improve their communities. In a spiritual sense, modern spiritual leaders are like salt in their communities when they have the Holy Spirit's guidance (Matt. 5:13). Leslie Hardinge (1968) puts it this way:

It is not sufficient to apply the salt of grace superficially to our lives. It must be thoroughly mingled with our thinking. No part of our mind can be free from God's overruling presence. You should have no thought, no ambition, no plan, no philosophy of life, no driving motive that is not flavored and preserved by the divine Spirit. (p. 37)

Pittman, Marin, and Williams (2007) assert that good leaders must have "salt" in their lives and share it to purify the lives of others, making those they help to be better and more productive.

#### *Fourth Principle: To Stand Firm in Their Identity*

When the young lads mocked Elisha, he did not run away or try to avoid them, nor did he attempt to discuss the issue or compromise with them. He also did not react out of his own wounded self-pride but, on the contrary, "cursed them in the name of the Lord" (2 Kings 2:24); so he was not being spiteful when he cursed the young men. True spiritual leaders are not vindictive, but they also do not back down in the face of opposition, especially when God's honor is involved. Elisha called upon God's name to resolve the attack that he was facing, responding not by his own strength but by God's power and relying on God's protection (White, 2002). Another instance in which Elisha did not back down from opposition, in this case from high government officials, is recorded in 2 Kings 3:1-27. Jehoram, an apostate king of Israel, called Jehoshaphat, the God-fearing king of Judah, to come with him and to fight against the Moabites. Even though they had developed a good strategy for engaging in this war, the implementation of the plan turned out to be a catastrophe because of lack of water on their way. So they called Elisha to help them. Elisha responded to their call and helped them, after he rebuked Jehoram because of his rejection of God.

To know one's self-identity is very important; this knowledge helps Christian leaders draw a firm line against compromise with ideas or opinions that are against their principles. It also enables them to speak out against opposition and injustice in their community. In John White's (1986) excellent book on leadership, he explains that Christian leaders as agents of change can expect attacks and obstacles on their way to accomplishing the mission of aiding communities, but that trials do not have to stop them from their work. On the contrary, they have to go forward to speak out against attack and injustice, because God is with them.

White (1986) gives modern spiritual leaders this caution: "If God entrusts

you with responsibility in the kingdom, it is likely that sooner or later you will have to deal with officials—perhaps with highly placed officials—who do not share your Christian convictions. They can be intimidating” (p. 38). On the other hand, despite their errors and failures, if authorities recognize their faults and are ready to make a change, the duty of the Christian leaders is to help authorities be successful, because to do so will benefit the general population and honor God.

### *Fifth Principle: To Build Trust*

Different people in Elisha’s community called on him to deal with their problems because they knew that they could trust him. A good example of this is the widow whose sons faced being sold into slavery (2 Kings 4:1-7); she was not afraid to open up to Elisha because she trusted him.

Trust is crucial to the process of transformative change because it is a necessary ingredient for successful cooperation and ultimate effectiveness in organizations (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). In addition, trust is an important element that agents of change can develop, because it creates a good relationship between the agents of change and the community and also encourages the community to open up to share their concerns and needs. Lachappelle and McCool (2011) explain that trust is demonstrated by an authentic relationship between people or groups that helps them share with each other in confidence and in faith that the parties are trying to help one another. However, in order to do that, Christian leaders must make themselves available to all members of their communities, as did Elisha. As God shows no favoritism but treats all people alike if they will come to Him in faith, so Christian leaders need to show no favoritism and be available to minister to all people in need so that all people can come to them without fear, confident that the leaders will hear and help them.

Christian leaders have the privilege of hearing the cry of the widows, the orphans, the poor, and the oppressed (Exod. 22, Jas. 1:27). Consider the words of O’Malley (2007):

It is in this availability to people that loving-kindness finds its clearest practical expression. The leader is prepared to waste time with colleagues, leave the door open, and spend time getting to know a wide range of individuals. This approach means stepping beyond the narrow limits of roles and specific tasks to become a builder of community. (p. 38)

This unconditional willingness to empower and help the less fortunate builds trust between the Christian leaders and their communities.

### *Sixth Principle: To Value and Encourage Partnership*

Elisha valued and encouraged partnership, modeling this when he

accepted the offer of the Shunammite woman to give him room and board (2 Kings 4:8-17). Elisha also availed himself of the help of Gehazi after Elisha asked for his servant's opinion about the woman's needs (2 Kings 4:14). Asking for help and accepting the proffered service of others are acts that demonstrate that a leader values and encourages partnership.

Partnership is the willingness of two or more entities, such as people, organizations, or associations, to share assets in order to reach common goals (Brehm, 2001). In partnerships, each entity receives and gives the service to others in an interchange of services that benefits all involved (ORSE, 2006). Christian leaders have to adopt an attitude of cooperation with others, sometimes even with those who do not share their same religious beliefs; they cannot accomplish their mission as agents of change by themselves, without the help of others who may have skills that the leaders do not have. Forming a partnership is often relatively easy; it involves preparation, contract and program establishment, and the implementation of the program (BIS, 2011). Maintaining the partnership is more challenging, however, because it encompasses commitment from each participant (Brandstetter, 2006).

If Christian leaders are appreciative of others' participation, the partnership will flourish. In the same way that Elisha was very grateful for what the Shunammite had done for him and his servant and wanted to do something to show her that he recognized the help and services she had provided for him, Christian leaders need to recognize the help they receive and thereby encourage people to continue to perform good deeds.

### *Seventh Principle: To Be Accountable*

In the story of the Shunammite, when Elisha promised the woman that she would have a son (2 Kings 4:16), God granted her a son. When this son died, Elisha continued to fulfill his responsibility to the woman and her family by asking God to restore the boy's life, because he felt a connection with the family (2 Kings 4:36). Another incident in which Elisha encouraged accountability was that of the ax head. The man had borrowed the ax, so was accountable to return it, something the man could not have done without the miracle God performed through Elisha (2 Kings 6:1-7).

When people are accountable for something, they not only have the responsibility but also something that Wenar (2006) calls "extra-responsibility." This means that among those who may participate in an activity, the accountable parties are those expected to demonstrate and report that they have faithfully completed their original promise (Wenar, 2006). To be accountable is very crucial for agents of change. Christian



leaders are accountable for their actions within their community and must model accountability to those they serve. When Christian leaders take on a responsibility and assume care for some problem in their community, if they fulfill that responsibility, they help the community to have more confidence in these leaders (Amit, 2003). Notably, God has called all those who claim to be His followers to be accountable to Him (Mark 10:17-37, Matt. 25:13) in order to take care of the needy and to help alleviate their misery (Boff & Elizondo, 1986).

### *Eighth Principle: To Have an Aptitude in Problem Solving*

Elisha was a person who was ready to provide the solution in time of need. When the king of Israel could not give any assistance, Elisha provided the solution for Naaman's sickness without bargaining with him (2 Kings 5:1-14). The same willingness to help was offered to the widow who came to him to ask for help (2 Kings 4:1-7) and the prophet who lost his ax head in the water (2 Kings 6:1-7). In every situation that Elisha encountered, he was willing to provide a solution to the problems.

To be apt at solving problems is to be able to use knowledge to assess and then solve the problems. According to Mourtos, DeJong, Okamoto, and Rhee (2004), agents of change as problem solvers are willing to spend time reading, gathering information, and analyzing the problem in order to provide strategies to tackle the issues systematically. They are then flexible in approaching different problems and are willing to take a risk in order to change or improve the situation.

Christian leaders need to understand that, even though many times authorities cannot provide the solution to problems that take place in their community, the agents of change might have the ability to help. However, to do this, as both Aranaout (n.d.) and UNICEF (2003) point out, leaders must be available and disposed to help, must thoroughly understand the problem at hand, and must be willing to put forth the effort to implement the solutions with the people in need. For example, many people are seeking justice from the authorities, and Christian leaders often bring solutions and hope to those people who are suffering, thereby empowering the people to change their situation. Examples are victims of joblessness, homelessness, human trafficking and sex trafficking, and modern slavery (Caritas Europa, 2010).

### *Ninth Principle: To Have Faith*

Faith had a big place in Elisha's ministry, as shown by all the miracles in which God used him. The story of the man from Baal Shalisha, in which a small amount of food fed a hundred people (2 Kings 4:43-44), illustrates Elisha's faith in God's ability and willingness to provide. Another instance

involved the officer who mocked Elisha when the prophet said that the next day the people of Samaria would have food (2 Kings 6:18-20). Elisha believed in God's promise and reprimanded this man for not having faith and for discouraging those who heard him. Elisha also showed faith when he asked the widow to gather pots for oil, promised the Shunammite woman that she would have a son the next year (2 Kings 4:1-36), and when he ordered Naaman to go to the Jordan to be cleansed of his leprosy (2 Kings 5:1-19). These instances demonstrate how important faith was in Elisha's ministry.

Rick James (2011) discusses the relationship between faith and community development, stating that "faith provides a spiritual fuel for development" (p. 113). Faith is fuel because, in hopeless situations, it brings hope and perseverance, enabling the work to go forward. Christian leaders need faith in God and can then encourage others to be faithful. The Refugee Study Centre (2012) points out that faith is very essential to people, helping them to be more resilient and giving people hope, motivation, and positivity so that people who are facing adversity or experiencing disaster can recover quickly. Positivity and optimism enable people to face adversities and challenges without giving up.

Faith is essential also in every Christian leader's life because it gives the spiritual strength needed for the leader to be an agent of change. Faith in God gives hope, meaning, and purpose in life as well as giving people the energy to face challenging situations in their work (Ershammar, 2010). Most importantly, faith has a transcendent, divinely given power that energizes the human spirit and provides power beyond human ability. Faith and prayer are the Christian leader's weapons; these can bring an "extra-ordinary" power into development work (Center for Family & Community Ministries, 2006; James, 2011). Faith also helps to build a strong community because it can bring elements such as justice, compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation with it. Faith in God's power supplies the energy that pushes people to move forward.

### *Tenth Principle: To Be Diligent in Work*

Through his entire ministry, Elisha demonstrated that he was diligent in performing the work that God had required or called him to do. Every time different people in his community asked him for help, he was willing to provide solutions to their issues, never leaving a project uncompleted because he was disgruntled or disinclined. Whether in the story of the floating ax head, the healing of the water in Jericho, the dilemmas faced by the widow and the Shunammite woman, Naaman's healing, or Elisha's response to the three kings, Elisha diligently worked for communities and individuals and

thereby accomplished his God-given mission of being a means for God to provide for His people.

For spiritual leaders to adopt Elisha's diligence in work is critical for community development. Without passion, engagement, and perseverance, facing and accomplishing difficult tasks or even merely advancing toward long-term goals is almost impossible (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). Agents of change cannot accomplish their mission if they are inconsistent or not committed to the task, or start the task and then give up because it is difficult. Instead, diligence pushes them to persist in their mission and to create an atmosphere of commitment to the work that inspires those around them (Dobre, 2013). This principle is very important, because without a diligence in doing and ultimately completing work, agents of change cannot apply the other principles.

## Conclusion

Elisha's acts provide Christian leaders with many lessons on becoming effective agents of change. Christian leaders have to see their mission as holistic, but not restricted to only their church members. Also, in order to be more effective in their role as agents of change, they need to be trained and equipped to tackle the issues involved in community development.

Christian leaders need to be conscious of the full scope of the mission to which God has assigned them. They must become aware of the spiritual, physical, and material needs of their communities, and then address those needs. Many people are waiting for Christian leaders to bring the solution to their social, economic, and physical needs, and in so doing these leaders can address people's spiritual needs as well. Community development work is a difficult task because it calls people to change their behavior. However, if workers ask God for power to be more effective in their mission, many people will break free from poverty to live the life God intended for all humans to enjoy.

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