

# TRANSFORMATION IN THE ZAMBEZI VALLEY



## ROBERT REESE

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**M**y first memory of visiting the home of Isaac Ndlovu was of our arrival at night, and hearing a strange bubbling sound amid the cacophony of greetings in the Tonga language. As it was pitch black that night, I could not tell where the sound came from until the next morning when it became clear it was made by women smoking pipes that drew smoke through water-filled gourds. That was in 1987 in the area near Binga, Zimbabwe where Ndlovu was just beginning ministry to his own people after he became a Christian miles away to the south. He had no visible support as an evangelist, but only a burning desire to share the liberating gospel with his Tonga relatives and neighbors. By Zimbabwean standards the Zambezi River Valley was backward and remote, long neglected by central government. Small children had to walk five miles one way to get to the nearest school, malaria was rampant, taking the life of Ndlovu's oldest daughter, and jobs were hard to come by. The Tonga existed by fishing in Lake Kariba or subsistence farming, doing battle with wild elephants for the privilege of eating the crops.

What a contrast when compared to what I saw in July 2010 after more than two decades of determined Christian activity directed by Ndlovu! By this time he had a network of five churches he had planted along with a couple of dozen younger church leaders

he was training. In addition he had strong links with several other churches because of his growing influence in the area. Visible changes had taken place in agriculture and education. Now I saw large gardens producing vegetables and fruit, a program for distributing seedlings of fruit trees to anyone who wanted them, and a growing network of elementary schools led by indigenous Christians. What I did not see at all during a week in the area was women smoking pipes!

Such a transformation needs some explanation. The simple truth is that it was a result of local initiative. From the beginning, Ndlovu never asked for assistance or waited for others to direct him. He simply announced that he was leaving a paying job as a farm worker and moving his family back to his ancestral home. That is how his ministry began, for no other reason than the fact that his people needed to hear the gospel. By the time the first missionaries, including me, arrived in 1987 in his home area, he had already built a church building out of local materials in the local style. Yet Ndlovu had never completed the first grade in school!

Ndlovu's story supplies some abiding principles that apply to church planting among spiritualists:

- Of primary importance is a thorough conversion to Christ. A thorough change from a spiritualist worldview to a biblical

one is essential for long-term transformation. The spiritualist mind is especially subject to fear and jealousy. The Christian mindset, however, delights in sharing resources and knowledge for the common good.

- With conversion comes a call to minister the gospel, and in Ndlovu's case he had a specific burden to reach his home community no matter what it might cost him, physically or spiritually. Commitment to a community is necessary for transformation: beyond simple determination is the necessity of living above the fear of witchcraft. Only the truly converted learn to live in God's protective hands safe from evil spirits. Knowledge of spiritual warfare is essential for transformation on any level: personal or communal. Ndlovu could not have succeeded without regular fasting and prayer.
- Local initiative is vital to genuine transformation. Outside intervention needs to be done very carefully in order not to quash local leaders. In Ndlovu's case, he was far removed from the centers of power and money, so he had to make his own decisions daily. He demonstrates that power and money are not even needed for community transformation. The seed of the gospel is said to be a force that grows "all by itself" (Mark 4:28). God delights in initiatives that use the "least of these" to shame the more influential of the world. His power is most evident in community transformation that relies on local initiative. 