

## **Breaking the cycle of missions dependency**

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It was a promotional piece urging us to send money, not missionaries, to foreign countries. The rationale was clear: "In most cases, sending just a portion of our surplus--\$50-\$100 each month--will provide support for one full-time national worker. The typical cost to send an American missionary family overseas is over \$50,000 a year--the same cost to support 50 or more national workers. Think of what that money could do for the Kingdom of God!"

Admittedly, this rationale is appealing. Nationals have the language and the culture--and they cost so much less. More than 140 missions organizations are now built on the premise of gathering and sending money, not people. Partners International, the largest of the money-gathering agencies, currently supports 3,300 full-time workers in over 50 countries.

As sensible and appealing as this strategy may sound, however, more and more mission observers are pointing to hazards inherent in "just supporting nationals." These hazards, ironically, pose the greatest threat to the nationals themselves. Jerry Rankin, president of the International Mission Board, Southern Baptist Convention, puts it this way:

**One thing inevitably occurs when North Americans subsidize the work of churches and pastors on the mission field: potential growth is stalled because of a mind-set that it can't be done unless an overseas benefactor provides the funds. . . . Jealousy often develops among the pastors and churches who don't receive assistance toward those who develop a pipeline of support from the United States. . . . In the long-term, support breeds resentment, especially if the support is not sustained indefinitely, because it creates a patronizing dependency.**

### **WHEN GIVING IS TAKING**

In other words, churches and church leaders that secure a financial pipeline to the United States soon become mired in an ecclesiastical welfare state, because the send-money approach, rather than strengthening the souls of national churches, keeps congregations from becoming self-governing and self-supporting. The recipients often suffer in the following ways:

Believers learn to depend neither on God nor on themselves. Because they have no need to give sacrificially of their own resources (however meager they may be), they never gain a sense of ownership. This postpones the day of true indigenization.

Leaders become preoccupied with raising North American funds. On a trip I took to India, I was overwhelmed by the many church leaders who "worked" me for a dollar connection. Such a ministry orientation inevitably weakens faith, corrupts pure motives, and compromises leadership integrity. Also, leaders who can't get connected to the pipeline become demoralized. The work can't be done without outside assistance, so why try?

Believers sue believers. In India, I was astounded to find few churches or ministries that

were'n't in the courts over property purchased using American dollars.

An independent, higher class of Christian workers arises whose stylish lifestyles are envied by "unconnected" believers. It is little surprise that motivation for "spiritual growth" soon is driven by something less than a hunger after righteousness. Should the donor seek to hold the recipient accountable for the use of funds to prevent such problems, the donor will be accused of reverting to old paternalistic patterns.

Recipients become ungrateful. "Sure, you gave us something, but look how much money you still have!" Or, "It's not yours anyway--you owe it to us." When I was president at Columbia International University, I knew something was bothering some of the African pastors studying with us. We discovered it was money. Though none of them could have been there without the great generosity of sponsoring mission agencies and the school, several recounted how they were owed so much more. One pastor stated: "Actually, you should not only fully support us now, you should support us for the first 5 or 10 years after our return since you have dis-fitted us for ministry in our homelands."

Perhaps the missiologist most knowledgeable about the problems with the just-support-nationals movement is Glenn Schwartz, founding director of World Mission Associates. In an interview in *Missions Frontiers Bulletin*, he noted another overlooked problem: "I don't think anyone would support that approach if they had gone out as a missionary to plant churches cross-culturally according to healthy principles of self-support and then had someone come along and entice away their best leaders with foreign money. That is what I call 'shepherd stealing.' The 'just support nationals' people are doing it shamelessly and on a very large scale."

A number of non-Western church leaders quoted in the same issue of the journal agreed with Schwartz. Bishop Zablon Nthamburi of the Methodist Church of Kenya, said: "The African Church will not grow into maturity if it continues to be fed by western partners. It will ever remain an infant who has not learned to walk on his or her own feet." One leader in the Friends Missionary Prayer Band in India added: "It's sad to say that foreign money has caused more harm than good in Indian missions. The result is culturally irrelevant, pseudo-Christian leaders and organizations that have long forgotten their roots."

Checking our mission bearings

For years I have resisted addressing this issue because I haven't had a clear-cut solution to offer. But in searching for the key to unlock this greatest puzzle in the current missions enterprise, I have become convinced the approach needs to be measured against the following four biblically based principles concerning giving and receiving:

1. *Does the giving win the lost?* Paul was willing to become anything to anyone for his single-minded objective: to win as many lost as possible and as widely as possible. So today, one test of any missions approach should be its evangelistic effectiveness. Does money invested promote or retard long-term indigenous church growth and evangelism?

The incredible story of the church in South Korea is instructive. From the outset, it was the

showcase for the Nevius method of establishing self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating churches. That may have meant slow growth at first, but today a third of South Koreans name Christ as Lord, and the church has sent out a missionary task force of thousands. There are other factors in the growth of the Korean church, of course, but the foundation of independent dependence on God is cited by many as the chief factor.

*2. Does the giving encourage true discipleship?* While evangelization is the controlling objective of the missionary enterprise, it is useless if it doesn't produce Christlike character in both the giver and the receiver. So we must ask if a giving arrangement nurtures generosity, humility, unity, and compassion on the part of the giver. Is a church being truly generous if it is willing to send money but not its own sons and daughters to the mission field? Like Jesus coming to Earth, does the giver feel a solidarity with, and a responsibility for, fellow believers in need? Are gifts given from the stance of a benefactor, or of a servant? "I am among you as one who serves," said Jesus.

The fact is that the number of career missionaries sent from North American churches has declined more than 20 percent in this decade (to 40,000 from the 50,000 number that held for decades). And at least a billion of the lost live among people where there is no evangelizing church movement, often no witness at all. By definition, someone must leave home to reach them. If a foreigner does not go in from the outside, they will never hear the gospel. The "don't send people" part of the equation is misguided, because there are no nationals to reach these billion people even if money were sent.

But even more important, from a biblical point of view, it is not just that North American missionaries are still needed to complete the Great Commission. The North American church needs to send its own for the sake of its own spiritual health. The sin of disobedience to the heavenly vision cannot be atoned for with dollars, and the spiritual loss is highly visible in a self-centered, materialistically minded people. The original mandate to "go into all the world" has never been rescinded. Paul's pioneering role remains the primary mission of the church toward the world.

The same question of discipleship must be asked of the receiving church. Do giving arrangements produce a spirit of sacrificial giving, of responsible ownership of the ministry, a greater reliance on God, and an attitude of genuine gratitude among the recipients? If not, the money is actually more a taking than a giving.

I know an American missionary who, burdened by the corrupting power of the American dollar on giver and receiver, has chosen to live and minister among the poor of Calcutta, along with an Indian colleague, on \$50 a month. That isn't the only legitimate approach, of course, but it is an approach that models our God's incarnational, personal giving in Christ.

*3. Does the giving honor the role of the local church?* New Testament giving was church-centered. In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, we see that believers gave to their churches, from which Paul received an offering to deliver to other needy churches. These churches then distributed the funds to the poor. The authority Christ invested in the church is lost when giving or receiving bypasses

the church. The contemporary money-gathering agencies need to exercise great care not to bypass the supervisory authority of the church at both ends.

4. *Does the giving nurture generous givers?* God's people are to give--compassionately, generously, sacrificially, joyfully (see 2 Cor. 8 and 9). Because this spirit of generosity serves as a fundamental test of the quality of spiritual life, Paul's admonition to "excel in this grace of giving" is not for the wealthy alone. There is a special obligation of the wealthy to give (1 Tim. 6:17-19), but Paul commends the poor of Philippi for having given generously for the needs of the poor in Jerusalem.

Though this generosity principle should govern giving, I list it last because the first three principles are much more dominant in the commands and examples of Scripture. Many "send money, not missionaries" advocates are, I believe, in danger of operating from this principle alone to the exclusion of the other three principles.

To whom should we give money?

The primary commands and examples for giving money in the New Testament center in one group: the poor. The astounding offerings of propertied people in the church of Jerusalem were to aid the poor (Acts 4:34-35), and the offerings Paul gathered *from* the "missionary churches" were also for the poor in Jerusalem, the home church. There is a reference to giving to support Paul's missionary team on the part of the "younger church" at Philippi (Phil. 4:10-19), and there is the incident where Paul may be asking for financial assistance for another missionary (1 Cor. 16:11). But I can find no instance, let alone any command, to give toward the *ministry* of another church.

One reason for this is evident. There were no church buildings or institutions like hospitals or schools, and local ministers were bivocational. If the early church is any model, it seems that paid ministry, buildings, and institutions emerged only as the church was able to afford them. From the beginning, small groups of believers were self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. Apparently for Paul, the spiritual strength derived from this independent reliance on God was more important than was any kind of external subsidy to move things along more rapidly.

Scripture is clear, then, that those who have material resources are to share with those who lack them. In the New Testament, this was providing the physical needs of the impoverished--what today might be called relief-and-development projects. But when we take the principle to mean assisting others in their spiritual ministry, we have no biblical command or precedent. If we justify the practice on the fourth principle of the need to exercise generosity, we have yet to find a practical way to do so that avoids spiritual harm to giver and receiver.

So, do we send money or people? Certainly we send people, especially to cross into unreached frontiers till the task of proclaiming the gospel to every man, woman, and child is completed. And we send money to assist the poor and disenfranchised in our worldwide family. Beyond those two New Testament patterns, I find not only no justification for supporting the ministry of other churches but also great hazards in doing so. Sharing financial resources in a way that is

spiritually empowering and Great Commission -completing for both donor and recipient remains our greatest unsolved problem.