

Supporting National Pastors – Let the Buyer Beware

By Craig Ott

In light of skyrocketing costs of sending North American missionaries, more and more churches and individuals are supporting national pastors and evangelists, who generally require a fraction of the support of Western missionaries. These native workers not only cost less but know the language and culture of their people, and they often have access to countries closed to traditional Western missionaries.

Many churches have established direct partnerships with churches in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe, which include considerable financial subsidies. By sending dollars to support national Christians to evangelize their own people, one proponent claims a new wave of missions has come that offers "the best and only hope for taking the Gospel" to the world.¹

A careful study of the history and theology of missions will, however, reveal that financial support of national pastors and evangelists is fraught with dangers. In fact, such well-intended subsidies often weaken receiving churches and undermine world evangelization in the longer term. Think twice before you start supporting nationals in your missions giving, and consider the following dangers.

Nine caveats

1. Western support of native workers is a model that national churches cannot reproduce. To be effective, any missionary strategy must be reproducible. Missionaries normally try to model ministry that national believers and churches can both carry on after the foreigners leave and reproduce in further evangelism. In this way the missionary multiplies his or her efforts, and the gospel's spread does not depend on foreign presence or assistance.

Western funding of native workers is a model nationals can never reproduce themselves because it, by definition, depends on outside funding. As a result, churches will tend to assume that seeking support from mission agencies for partnerships with wealthy Western churches is the normal way to support pastors and send missionaries. Success in ministry becomes tied to Western purse strings. When the dollars stop, so does the evangelism – a very questionable strategy indeed, considering the precarious future of the U. S. economy.

A missionary who was working in a tribal group in Mexico had to spend days traveling from village to village by donkey. Thinking of the travel time that could be saved, a well-meaning friend offered to buy him a four-wheel-drive vehicle. The missionary wisely rejected the offer, explaining, "If I use such a vehicle, the natives will say, 'We can't do evangelism unless we also have a vehicle.'" His ministry would cease to be reproducible. Having a good long-range strategy often means rejecting methods promising greater short-term results.

To reproduce themselves, native churches must discover creative ways to spread the gospel and plant churches without outside support.

2. Such a strategy is based on the assumption that the spread of the gospel depends on money. Financial resources can help disseminate the gospel, and sacrificial giving is an important Christian discipline demonstrating commitment, love, and devotion to God and his purposes. But making the fulfillment of the Great Commission dependent on the church's ability to raise money is a fallacy Western Christians have uncritically, unconsciously accepted. It reflects our Western materialism and commitment to a professionalized ministry. Again, this theoretically limits God's work to the measure of the church's economic prosperity.

Encouraging nationals to seek Western support for evangelism sends developing churches a not-so-subtle message: "In order to evangelize and send missionaries, you must have money to support professionals. Because your resources are limited, you must seek Western financial aid."

While we may encourage nationals to give sacrificially to support their own, we must avoid communicating that professional pastors and missionaries are the only, or even the best, way to reach

the world for Christ. One of the greatest missionary movements in the church's history was initiated by Count Zinzendorf and the Moravians, who achieved a ratio of one missionaries to every 12 communicant members. Eventually they had three members on the mission field for every one at home.² They did this by developing creative ways of generating partial to full self-support; in modern jargon, they became tentmakers.³

Roland Allen said the apostle Paul never took financial support to the churches he started and argued persuasively against such a practice.⁴ When we make finances a "key" to world evangelization, the danger is great that we are basing our mission strategy on cultural, materialistic values rather than biblical principles.

3. It can create dependency and stunt giving in national churches. Admittedly, there is great poverty in many countries, but teaching new churches to depend on Western resources can blind them to recognizing their own giving potential or seeking creative ways to overcome obstacles by trusting God.

The history of missions is replete with sad stories of resentments created when developing churches became dependent on Western funding. Programs are developed and workers are hired on the basis of outside subsidies and national churches come to expect and count on them. When sending churches seek to reduce the subsidies, or when the national believers spend or hire in ways disagreeable to the supporting churches, hard feelings and misunderstandings normally result. Any giving to mission churches or native workers must answer two questions: "Will this stimulate or discourage local giving?" "Will it create unhealthy dependency and foreign dominance, or help the church mature and become self-sustaining?"

The amazing growth of the church under communist oppressors in China demonstrates that churches can grow and mature even under the most severe conditions without Western support. Indeed, when the Chinese churches received Western assistance, they experienced minimal growth.

4. Heavy dependence on Western funds can reinforce feelings of inferiority. Because of the extreme poverty in many countries, nationals already felt inferior. Western support of native pastors and evangelists, and the resulting dependency, strengthen the belief that only Western Christians have the resources (namely, money) to evangelize and maintain their churches. Such support can result in a new form of the old paternalism that so characterized the colonial era. Giving in ways that advance self-sufficiency and self-worth demonstrates love, but giving that creates dependency is dehumanizing and oppressive.

5. Western support can create a mercenary spirit among nationals. While the motives of most national pastors and evangelists are above reproach, even motives for Christian service can become easily mixed when a secure and steady income is offered to those willing to become pastors or evangelists. Competition and jealousy can arise among believers vying to secure coveted, paid positions in a land of hunger. Westerners are rarely in a position to discern such motives, and they all too often tap leaders the nationals would not have chosen.⁶ Churches can become resentful or jealous of other churches receiving extravagant subsidies from American partner churches due to personal connections.

Eastern European churches, which have learned to survive, and, in many cases, carry on significant ministries under great hardship, relative poverty, and, often, lay leadership, are now facing the challenges of new freedoms and adjustment to Westernization and materialism. If not done with the greatest care, the outpouring of well-intended financial gifts from Western churches could do much to further confuse and pollute churches that have been purified by 45 years of communist oppression.

All too often native pastors and churches have become preoccupied with ministries that attract Western dollars (such as orphan work), while neglecting more basic pastoral care and evangelism. Even development work, if not wisely administered, can hinder church growth. A great missionary statesman of the last century, John L. Nevius, observed how employing native evangelists in China tended to stop the work of volunteer lay evangelists, who resented not being paid, thus hindering the natural spread of the gospel.⁸ William Kornfield describes how churches among the Quechua Indians in Latin America that

were once self-supporting and self-propagating have, as a result of financial paternalism, become divided and have lost the vision for reaching the lost.⁹

6. Foreign paid workers are not always more effective, and sometimes are less effective and credible than lay workers. When the mission stopped paying national workers in India, the number of lay workers multiplied, which resulted in mass movements to Christ in the Methodist Episcopal Church.¹⁰

National evangelists are sometimes rejected by their peers when the latter discover that Westerners pay them. In China they are called "the white man's running dog." Foreign nationals may judge foreign-paid evangelists as mercenaries, or even subversives, who have become Christians and preach the gospel only for the financial benefits. The communist Chinese saw subsidies of Chinese churches and workers as evidence that Christianity was not only a foreign religion, but an instrument of Western imperialism.¹¹ The heavy Western subsidizing of national evangelists and pastors could reproduce these kinds of suspicions in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe today. Nevius wrote,

While working with their hands in those several callings they bore testimony to the truth wherever they went, and were exciting great interest in their own neighborhoods. It was not long, however, before these men were employed, ..., and the interest in and about their homes ceased. . . I have not been able to learn of any one of them, that his after career was a specially useful one. I refer to these not as unusual and exceptional.¹²

When national believers fail to support their own workers, the impression is reinforced that Christianity is in fact a foreign religion that has neither taken root nor inspired the deep commitment of its followers. Furthermore, church members can resent a pastor who is not accountable to them because his salary is paid by a foreign mission or church. This danger is especially great today, as some North American churches have started directly supporting pastors of poorer Eastern European churches, bypassing the local congregations those pastors serve.

One the other hand, it is a tremendous testimony of love and commitment when national believers who have so little sacrifice greatly to support their own pastors or send evangelists to tell others the Good News. This demonstrates that Christianity is not a Western religion or an agent of imperialism, but has in fact commanded the deepest commitments among the various peoples of the earth.

7. It can rob the national church of the joy of being a truly missionary church. When the Evangelical Free Churches of Venezuela caught a vision to send their first missionary to do tribal work, they sought assistance from the North American mother mission. The mission leaders responded, "If you are to be a truly missionary church, you must send them and support them yourselves." At first the Venezuelans didn't understand, and they protested. "But you have so much and we so little!" Soon, however, they raised the necessary support and were able to send their first missionary. There was tremendous joy at the commissioning service, because the Venezuelans saw how God provided and knew that they had become a truly multiplying, missionary church. Had North American funds been provided, they would have been robbed of that joy.

8. Employing national missionaries may not be the bargain it appears. While not all native missionaries will need costly higher education, we have to ask what kind of preparation they will require. Cross-cultural ministry, contextualization, and so on are challenges faced by Western and non-western missionaries alike. To avoid the mistakes of the past and to increase their effectiveness, missionaries must have careful preparation and training. Specialized ministries in particular – such as Bible translation and medical work – demand extensive training, which normally does not come cheap.

Larry Poston questions whether native missionaries really can live as cheaply as some claim, especially in the cities, where the cost of living can be staggering. Given the fact that the world is rapidly urbanizing, any long-range strategy must include reaching the urban masses.¹³

Donors should carefully ask about the training and placement of "bargain missionaries" before assuming that they really are receiving more "bang for their buck."

9. Sending money instead of missionaries comes dangerously close to compromising the very essence of the Great Commission. The Great Commission calls us to not only send dollars, but ourselves. Just as the Father sent the Son to become man and dwell among us, Jesus sends us into the world to personally identify with those whom we would reach. This will not always be the most economical demonstration of love: We cared enough to surrender our comfort and our way of life to share God's love with others.

Conclusion

I do not mean to underestimate the importance of sacrificial missions giving. Missionaries must be sent. Relief and compassion ministries must go on. There is a place for certain types of financial assistance to developing churches.

This article, rather, is a call for discernment in how those funds are spent. To truly promote the long-range purposes of world evangelization, subsidies of national churches and workers must promote the planting of reproducing churches, protect the integrity of national believers and their witness, and avoid the pitfalls described above. Pragmatism cannot be allowed to overrule spiritual principles and blind us to the lessons of history. Short-term gains can sometimes mean long-term disaster. As Wade Coggins writes, "If our churches give only their money, and not their sons and daughters, our missionary vision will be dead in a generation or less. We can't substitute money for flesh and blood."¹⁴

To reach our every-changing world for Christ, new and creative strategies are indeed called for. But we must not become bound by unbiblical methods that are outdated or rooted in materialistic assumptions. There are no shortcuts in the task of world evangelization. It demands total commitment. It also demands careful discernment.

ENDNOTES

¹ K.P. Yohannan. *The Coming Revolution in World Missions: God's Third Wave* (Altamonte Springs, Fla.: Creation House, 1986), p. 14.

² J. Herbert Kane. *A Concise History of Christian World Missions*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1978, pp. 79-80.

³ See J. Christy Wilson, Jr. *Today's Tentmakers*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1979, pp. 29-31.

⁴ Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or ours?* rev. ed. London: World Dominion, 1927, p. 73-83.

⁵ See W. Harold Fuller, *Mission Church Dynamics*. Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1980, pp. 180-183.

⁶ See Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing House, 1962, p. 154.

⁷ Jim Yost, "Development work can hinder church growth," in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, October, 1984, pp. 352-360.

⁸ John L. Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1899, p. 16.

⁹ "What hath or Western money and our Western gospel wrought?" in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, July, 1991, p. 231.

¹⁰ Frank W. Warne, "India's Mass Movements in the Methodist Episcopal Church," in *International Review of Missions* 6, April, 1917: pp. 204-205, cited in Allen, *Expansion*, p. 111.

¹¹ See Stephen Neill, "China and the West," chapter 4 in *Colonialism and Christian Missions*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966, pp. 116-169.

¹² Planting, p. 12.

¹³ See "Should the West stop sending missionaries?" in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, January, 1992, p. 60.

¹⁴ Wade Coggins, "The risks of sending our dollars only," in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, July, 1988, p. 204.

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