

Dependency

Glenn Schwartz

The well-intended generosity of Christians often backfires by creating dependency. We can learn valuable lessons from the past failings of misguided kindnesses.

How to Destroy Local Initiative—Step One:

A Navajo Indian believer from the western United States, whose people have suffered much at the hands of the rest of the population, is reported to have shared this remarkable insight. He said, "The missionaries did not teach us to tithe because they thought we were too poor. They did not know that we were poor because we did not tithe." There is a law in the universe that if God gives you something, you're supposed to give some of it back to Him. Now I am not saying that tithing is the answer to all the church's problems, but I am saying that if we assume people cannot give back to God some of what they have been given—if we assume they are too poor to give to God—we deprive them of a blessing that God has in store for them.

How to Destroy Local Initiative—Step Two:

When outsiders construct church buildings for local people, they can inadvertently become thieves of self-respect. Foreign funding for buildings can take away the privilege that local people should have of building their own churches, clinics or schools. Instead of preserving dignity, we can create a dependency that often comes back to haunt us.

During a seminar on this subject, an American missionary in the back of the room raised his hand and said, "I know what you're talking about. Some years ago I took a group of 36 people from North America to South America to build a church building for the local believers. We stayed there several weeks, finished the building, gave it to the local people and then went home. Two years later we got a letter from the people at that church: 'Dear friends, the roof on your church building is leaking. Please come and repair it....'"

On the other hand, some mission societies, from the beginning, insist on the involvement of local people when building their buildings, supporting their evangelists and sending out missionaries. Some of these churches not only build their own buildings, but send out their own missionaries within the first decade of their existence.



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If It Is Not Reproducible, Forget It

The structure of the Christian movement introduced to many parts of Central and East Africa is not reproducible. This complex foreign structure was created and built up over decades with an expenditure of millions of dollars, pounds and deutschemarks.

If the visiting foreign personnel during the colonial period could not run the programs without heavy foreign subsidy, how could they expect that believers to do so when the subsidy was removed? The result is that, in Central and East Africa, church after church cannot think of cross-cultural evangelism beyond their borders because of the weight of the structures inherited from the past. Furthermore, since many of these church programs could not be sustained locally, how could they be reproduced elsewhere?

Hence, well-intentioned national church leaders are preoccupied with maintenance rather than dynamic missionary outreach. They have little energy left over to make cross-cultural outreach a reality, let alone a spiritually rewarding adventure. In the end, local leaders are made to appear like poor managers, or even failures, for not being able to keep elaborate church programs going. That is just one of the many regrettable results of creating irreproducible structures.

How to Keep a Church Poor

Perhaps one of the most lamentable aspects of irreproducible church and mission structures is that the enormous flow of outside funding is what actually keeps many churches "poor." Believers through the years found that it was not necessary to put paper money into the church offering. They knew that if they sat back and waited long enough, funds would eventually come from some unseen source. Indeed, those who created the programs could not afford to let them fail. People of "compassion" would find the funding and close the gap, if for no other reason than to save the reputations of those who started the programs in the first place.

Even mainline churches which have experienced the blessing of being organizationally and financially independent find it necessary to continue teaching their people that "it is more blessed to give than to re-

ceive." Sometimes the ease with which other groups receive outside money becomes a strong temptation. It helps to be reminded that if people can be bought with money, perhaps they can be bought. The march of Islam across Africa, fueled by Middle East petrodollars, is a real source of danger to nominal African Christianity.

Another Sad Story

A major Christian organization in East Africa was well on the way toward functioning entirely with local funding. Culturally appropriate structures were in place. Local funds were being raised. Then a donor in Europe offered them a substantial grant. They felt they couldn't refuse it without offending the donor. But something tragic happened in the process. Board members of the institution said, "If overseas money is that easy to get, why do we go through all the work of trying to raise funds locally?" Sadly, the local fund raising plans were scrapped. The soul of the institution was sold in favor of easy money. We should all weep.

And a Happy Story

A pastor in the Cape Province of South Africa has a vision for a ministry with a budget of a hundred million rand. My heart sank when I heard that he was recently on a visit to Europe. Imagine my surprise when I learned that God spoke to him on that trip, telling him that the money should be raised at home, from business people within the Cape Province of South Africa. If this happens, blessing will abound among all the people of the Cape Province, rather than being restricted to a few European donors.

A Story of Hard Work

After securing permission from the local authorities, a pastor bought a field and set about plowing it. A neighboring villager saw what he was doing. He approached the church leader in the field and said, "Reverend, why are you plowing this field?" He replied, "Because church offerings are down and I need to support my family."

The neighbor responded, "You are a man of God, you should be doing God's work. You go do God's work, and I'll plow your

field for you." When harvest time came the neighbor offered to help the minister again.

That church leader later made this observation. "When our people see that we as church leaders are willing to work for our own living, then our people will show that they, too, are willing to help. That is how the attitude of our people will change."

Think of it again this way: So long as there is a veiled source of income from some unknown place, local people will not feel the need to support their own ministries. The question is this: Does anyone have the courage to let the system collapse so that what rises up truly belongs to the people?

What Can be Done: Mobilize Local Resources

More than a hundred years ago missiologists discovered the importance of self-support for establishing mission churches. Now, a century later, not only are

the lessons of healthy self-support not being applied, but many rationalize that the only reasonable thing to do is to supplement or in some cases replace local giving with global resources. They do not seem to realize that when global resources replace local resources, people are deprived of the joy of giving back to the Lord some of what He has given to them. Even more tragically, somewhere the gospel will not be preached because too much money is being diverted to churches already in existence.

One leader from East Africa told me that he faced a double challenge: "We must do more than successfully raise local funds. That we can do. In addition, we must challenge the Western structures and assumptions which continually pour in funds from the outside." Now is the time to staunch the flow of misguided funding to emerging churches, so that we can see churches move in the blessing of God.

Study Questions

1. In cross-cultural situations, what disincentives are created by outside funding?
2. List two ways that the mobilization of local resources fosters advancement of the kingdom of God.

