

Using Nationals in Missions

I. A Developing Trend

One of the newer trends in world missions is the significant increase in the number of American churches directly supporting national believers ministering in their own country. A few years ago a book entitled, “The Coming Revolution in World Missions: God’s Third Wave,” was sent free of charge to a large number of U.S. churches encouraging them to directly support national evangelists in India. The author, K.P. Yohannan, argued for local churches in the West to change their mission giving from American missionaries to direct support of national missionaries and evangelists. He presented the argument that the native missionary movement was the ‘third wave’ in missions, and it was God’s plan to focus on ‘national’ missionaries as the new force for missions. He likened this movement to the ‘first wave’ of missions as characterized by the beginning of the church, when the gospel swept through the Jewish and pagan communities of the Roman Empire. He distinguished this movement from the ‘second wave’ of missions, the modern missions movement beginning with William Carey and lasting through the end of World War II and the Colonial Era. This book, along with numerous other articles, has been published in the ensuing years, to support the idea of ‘using’ nationals in the work of missions. As a result, the church is presented with the issue of whether to ‘use’ nationals in the work of missions. (‘Use’ in this article refers to the practice of an American church directly supporting a national church leader as a part of their ministry)

II. What Are the Issues?

How should local church leaders, mission committee members, and believers respond to this growing movement? It is evident that local churches must work through this issue and determine the biblical principles and cultural issues to help guide them in making a decision which has the potential of changing the face of missions.

I invite you to listen to a possible discussion taking place in a missions committee meeting.

Member 1: I received a brochure this week from an agency advocating that local churches in the United States begin to support national believers as part of their missions program.

Member 2: I’ve seen information about national believers and how we should be supporting them, but I’m not sure why we should.

Member 3: Is it biblical for us to support these men ministering in their own country and in their own churches? We need to see what the Word of God says about it.

Member 1: I agree, the brochure mentioned some reasons for this type of support, but it doesn’t give many references to support their view.

Member 2: What reasons did they give in the brochure?

Member 1: It seemed the major emphasis was on finances. I think the main point was the idea of “getting more bang for your buck.”

Member 2: I would certainly agree it would be cheaper to support a national rather than a missionary. What other reasons did they give?

Member 1: I have the article with me, I will read a couple of paragraphs that give a good summary of the argument.

“Thank You For Not Coming” read the banner headline in a full-page ad in Christianity Today. It was a promotional piece urging us to send money, not missionaries. The rationale is

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 as supporting 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 organizations are now built on the premise of gathering and sending money, not people. One of the largest of the money-gathering agencies reports that it now supports 3,300 full-time workers in over 50 countries.”ⁱ

Member 2: Wow, it sounds like they have some good arguments. Maybe we should start making plans to move some of our financial support of American missionaries to use national believers in our missions work.

Member 3: I think these are good arguments, but I still think we need to do more study to see what guidelines we can find to give us direction before we present the idea to the church.

Member 2: I agree, let’s try to learn more about the topic and see if God has provided us with some insights into the question.

While this is not the record of an actual conversation, it is one that has and will take place in an increasing number of local churches. There are many agencies sending out materials advocating the position that American churches and mission agencies should be using national leaders for the task of church planting and development. What is the answer? Local churches are becoming more aware of the issues which surround the new movement toward using nationals. They are beginning to question how to determine the allotment of missionary funds between ‘missionaries,’ ‘national missionaries’ and ‘national church ministries.’ What should local churches do as it relates to direct support of national leaders? Mission agencies are being faced with questions from their constituencies as an increasing number of books and articles dealing with “Indigenous Missions” are published and distributed to believers. What biblical and cultural guidelines should the agency offer to the ‘sending’ church concerning ‘using’ nationals? It is imperative that local church leaders in the United States develop a response that is both biblically accurate and culturally sensitive. The time has come for American churches to establish a working relationship model between the sending church, the receiving church, and the support and use of national leaders in the work of global evangelization and church development.

III. Unwittingly Building Dependency

An obvious area of concern is the role of foreign money and the possibility of financial dependence. It seems the subject of money is one of the more difficult topics in the church and in daily life. The American church wrestles with an abundance of finances, material goods, and resources when compared with most of global Christendom, so it only seems right to be generous and support nationals in indigenous ministries. But the dangerous possibility is that this money represents not just the ability to make purchases, support nationals and assist in the ministry, but also presents a very real and tangible danger of having power over situations or people. When this real or perceived power is present in a situation, biblical guidelines may be stretched to accommodate the particular needs or wishes of one of the parties. This perceived connection of money and power causes major problems in the work of global ministry. This connection also comes in direct conflict with the concept of ‘indigenous’ missions.

Modern missions has used the concept of ‘indigenous,’ to describe a ministry which is self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating, the classic three-self principle model. This word ‘indigenous’ is closely tied to ‘national,’ another term used in missions meaning a person

who is ‘native’ to or a ‘natural part’ of a particular place. Local churches in the United States are indigenous, or as we would define the concept in America, autonomous. They support and govern their own ministries and are also pastored by a national pastor who is an American.

But, what happens when foreign funding is introduced into a ministry setting? What happens when a foreign church directly supports a ‘national’ pastor or evangelist? Does this conflict with the indigenous / autonomous principle of the local church? Can local churches provide assistance to another local church in need? Is that different from American churches or missionaries directly paying the national leadership of an independent local church? Rick Wood, managing editor for Missions Frontiers, has given an illustration of what can happen if western funding is the basis of a ministry.

“Last year we presented the critical need for the De-Westernization of the gospel in order for it to spread naturally throughout the unreached peoples by means of ‘people movements’ to Christ. In this issue we highlight another difficult, but related issue: dependency in mission. As missionaries from the West and other wealthy areas like Korea have gone out, they have often brought not only their foreign culture, methods and structures, but also the money to support them. The result has been culturally foreign institutions which have continued to depend on outside funding, because they were never indigenous to the peoples the missionaries were working with. These peoples never took ‘psychological ownership’ of the missionaries’ work. They became dependent.

This psychological ownership occurs when the people decide that the church or program is theirs and it will succeed or fail depending on what they do, not the foreigner or missionary with foreign money. The gospel itself cannot become indigenous to a people without this kind of ownership and independence from outside control.”ⁱⁱ

Wood presents his case in even stronger language in another article.

Many churches in the U.S. have bought into this scheme as a way of getting more ‘bang for their missions buck.’ But what they don’t realize is that this ‘bargain basement’ approach to missions is going to blow up in their faces creating a dependency on the mission field to foreign funds that is deadly to the vibrant, reproducing church planting movements that we want to see within every people. Every church and every people has the God-given privilege and responsibility of supporting its own ministry and cross-cultural outreach. Foreign money robs these peoples of the incentive to give of their lives and resources to support the ministries of their own churches.ⁱⁱⁱ

William Kornfield, a long-time missionary himself, has described financial paternalism and accompanying westernization of the gospel as two of the most critical issues facing us in the world of missions today. He sees three problems as it relates to financial paternalism.

- “It separates the people who get the money from those who do not.
- It implies that the church cannot grow, or in some cases even exist in its own native soil apart from Western money.
- It stifles local initiative, usually in direct proportion to the length of time such assistance has been given.”^{iv}

Member 1: I have never considered how being generous with my finances could cause more harm than good. I just want to help those poor people do something they are not able to do on their own. And it seems like if they had more money they could work more efficiently. After all, we pay all the expenses of our pastor, shouldn’t their pastors have the same support? But the comments from these men have caused me to consider some of the problems I might be causing by giving too much.

Member 2: There are two things I would like to say in response to our discussion. First, I really never thought about our pastor as being a ‘national’ leader. I always thought of a national as someone from the mission field. But I guess we’re also nationals. Secondly, I also have a burden to help in the work of missions, but I have never thought about how money can change a situation and cause problems. I want to help the church, not be an additional problem. I need to think about what these men have said.

Member 3: I think it’s important that we understand the principles we’ve just seen. If we’re going to establish a biblical model for ‘using nationals in the work of missions,’ we need to have a clear understanding of the people we are talking about. This is the first time I have really thought about the ‘national churches’ as being just like us. I guess I have thought about the ‘national’ evangelists and pastors as people that we can help financially, but I never thought about what that might do to their relationship to their local church.

Member 2: What if a rich person from another country was to say to our church that he wanted to pay our pastor’s salary? I don’t think I would like that. I think I would feel indebted to him and I agree that it would probably hinder the giving of our own people if they knew this rich person was willing to pay the bills.

Member 3: If our pastor was being paid by a foreigner, would he still feel that he is directly responsible to our local church? I think there’s a biblical model for people, to whom a pastor is ministering, to provide for his material needs while he gives them spiritual teaching and leadership. I think we need to do more study on the subject, especially on the relationship between a church and their pastor. What is the biblical model of a proper relationship between the pastor or other vocational ministers and his local church?

Member 3: Has God established guidelines concerning issues such as finances, authority and responsibility? We need to study the Bible more.

IV. What does the Bible Say about the Issue?.

Scripture has established certain parameters concerning the responsibility of the church to provide for the material needs of their pastor. The following two passages help to develop a biblical theology of this responsibility.

In the first passage, 1 Corinthians 9:11-14, Paul gives an argument concerning accusations by some in the Corinthians church, that he was in the ministry for the sake of money. He clearly states that while it would be biblical for him to be supported by believers in Corinth, he chose not to exercise this right in order to protect his testimony and the gospel of Christ.

The central truth Paul develops in this passage is the responsibility believers have to minister in material ways to ‘those who preach the gospel.’ This pattern establishes one of the central teachings concerning the relationship between a pastor and his church.

The second passage, 1 Timothy 5:17-18, challenges the church not only to provide for the minister, but to do so with zeal. Those who minister in Word and doctrine are worthy of more than average honor. It would seem from this, along with the previous passage, that the church has a responsibility to provide for their pastor to the maximum of their ability.

But, what if a local church does not have sufficient funds to pay a ‘full-time’ salary to a vocational minister? This is the situation which may arise in missions work. What are the guidelines for this situation? Should a missionary or someone with money provide additional funds for the ‘full-time’ salary so the national pastor or evangelist would not have to work to assist in his material needs? The answer would be an unqualified yes, if a ‘full-time’ salary were biblically mandated. But the Bible gives the model of a church ministering to the maximum of

their capability, not the establishment of a salary package which must be met by either the church or foreign funding. In many situations the argument of expediency or efficiency is used to support foreign funding, but pragmatism cannot be allowed to be the driving force in the work of God.

Member 3: I have looked at those passages before, but I must admit I haven't thought of them as they relate to missions and nationals. Isn't it the model here in the United States that pastors are paid a full-time salary?

Member 1: I am not sure the model we have here is a requirement for all churches. Maybe we need to think about how a national church can care for their pastor in alternative ways. I know I have heard many times how the church is growing in countries where Christians are persecuted and the pastors are not paid. Maybe we need to understand the call for sacrifice and commitment these men have accepted and rejoice as we see how God is blessing their sacrificial spirit.

Member 2: That certainly makes more sense than saying, 'Our policy must work for local churches all over the world, regardless of the country or culture.'

V. Example of Using Nationals in Missions

Member 1: Let me read from another article I have from Mission Frontiers I think would be helpful as we talk about using nationals in missions. The title is "*When the Mission Pays the Pastor.*" The author did an analysis of how four different groups in Indonesia responded to either having the mission pay the local church leadership or having the local church responsible for their own leadership. His conclusion was, 'Subsidy did not have a positive impact on the growth of the national church. In fact, the growth of the church ceased when the subsidy was formally initiated.'^v

Member 3: If that is an accurate study, we need to be very careful how we use nationals lest in our zeal and compassion we do more harm than good.

Member 2: Did he give any reasons why the churches, where the missionaries provided the financial support of national church leaders, did not have significant growth?

Member 1: Yes he did, he mentioned three major reasons.

- First, a loss of lay involvement. The initiation of subsidy signaled a move away from reliance on lay leadership to reliance on a professional clergy.

- Second, loss of focus. The paid workers began to concentrate more on pleasing the missionary, who paid their salaries than on meeting the needs of their churches. Further, the paid workers lost the vision for evangelism. They increasingly gave their attention to ministering to the needs of the congregation, neglecting to visit the neighboring villages to preach the gospel. Finally, over time the paid workers became increasingly aware of how little they were being paid. This resulted in increased focus on how to increase their level of remuneration, and less attention on the work of the ministry.

- Third, loss of devotion. When the churches realized that the missionary was paying the salary of the pastor, they lost their sense of ownership of the pastor. They increasingly came to see the pastor as the missionary's hired worker. They increasingly felt no obligation to give toward the pastor's support. When the pastor saw that the congregation was not concerned with providing for his support and well-being, he devoted himself even more to pleasing the missionary who paid his salary. The pastor also increased his efforts to persuade the missionary to increase his salary.^{vi}

Member 2: Wow, that is powerful. What should we recommend to the church concerning using nationals in missions?

Member 3: I think there are three major factors we must take into consideration in making our recommendation:

1. First, the scriptural pattern of a local church being responsible to support their pastor. I know our own church members would not want a foreigner or even another local church directly paying our pastor.

2. Second, the information from this survey forces us to temper our desire to use our money to help with an honest evaluation of the results, even those not intended. The topic of dependency in missions is an area we need to continue to study. I know my desire is to do the work of God in His way, not just because it seems more expedient or efficient.

3. Third, we as a local church need to gain a better understanding of how we can partner with local churches around the world to share in the work of the ministry. We work with local churches in our own area to accomplish tasks, and we can do the same thing on a global scale. We must develop a model which doesn't violate cultural norms or scriptural guidelines. We need God's wisdom to truly be a help and not a hindrance to their ministry.

Member 2: I think in our next meeting we need to discuss the topic of biblical partnership. I know I have seen many articles about this subject and I think it would be helpful to us as we make recommendations to the church about how we can develop working relationship with churches around the world which will be a true help to the ministry.

ⁱ McQuilkin, Robertson. "Should We Stop Sending Missionaries?" Mission Frontiers. August 1999. Also <<http://www.missionfrontiers.org/1999/08/mcquilk.html>> 2/14/2000.

ⁱⁱ Wood, Rick. "Dependency: The Killer of People Movements to Christ." Mission Frontiers. January/February 1997. Also <<http://www.missionfrontiers.org/jf972.htm>> 2/14/2000.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wood, Rick. "Should We Stop Sending Missionaries?: Principles for avoiding the corrupting power of money." Mission Frontiers. August 1999. Also <<http://www.missionfrontiers.org/1999/08/mcquilk.html>> 2/14/2000.

^{iv} Kornfield, William. "What Hath Our Western Money and Our Western Gospel Wrought?" Mission Frontiers. January/February 1997. Also <<http://www.missionfrontiers.org/jf9710.htm>> 2/14/2000.

^v Allen, Wayne. "When the Mission Pays the Pastor." Mission Frontiers. January/February 1999. Also <<http://www.missionfrontiers.org/1999/0102/jf9913.htm>> 2/14/2000

^{vi} Allen, Wayne. "When the Mission Pays the Pastor." Mission Frontiers. January/February 1999. Also <<http://www.missionfrontiers.org/1999/0102/jf9913.htm>> 2/14/2000