

The Expense of North American Missionaries

By Jeff Boesel

Why send very expensive North American missionaries to other countries when direct financing of local Christian ministries can accomplish so much more with less? This is a question well worth considering and at first blush appears to have no successful agency answer. However, this question is based on some assumptions that are not often accurate.

First, the person asking this question is forgetting that missionaries from whatever culture go to another culture out of obedience to the leading of God's Holy Spirit. People normally don't make the sacrifices necessary to be a cross-cultural missionary just because they want to. Think about it. Missionaries have to leave their culture and families; take about a 50% cut in pay, or more; ask others to give them money so they can survive and minister... get the picture? Also, those who are members of their financial support team give out of obedience to the leading of God's Holy Spirit. If God leads them to directly support local, host-country ministries then we would expect them to obey that leading as well.

All of this doesn't let missionaries and their agencies off the hook of being good stewards of the finances entrusted to them. Abuse does happen from time to time so most agencies are members of outside accountability groups to monitor spending. The IRS is also quite strict on how funds donated to a non-profit are spent.

But these thoughts bring up the second assumption in this question; that other cultures will view and handle funds directly from the U.S. the way that their donors would expect them to. To be blunt, this is simply not true, even in the best of situations. I'm not trying to say that direct funding always results in the abuse of those funds, but I am saying that the cultural grid of the Christian receiving the funds is definitely different than the cultural grid of those sending the funds. This will result in some, if not most, of the money being used in ways the donor would not expect. Let me give you two generic, somewhat extreme, examples that I have personally witnessed in one form or another.

First, you have a local pastor who is fortunate enough to become the "partner" of a donor church in the U.S. While the donating church hopes to see the church grow, reproduce, and reach more people for Christ, almost the opposite happens. The receiving pastor equates this blessing as a spiritual endorsement of himself and his ministry. It puts him on a higher status level than his peers and he plays that to his advantage. Soon he has developed his own spiritual kingdom with himself as the head and developing no one beneath him because he sees all others as challengers to his power.

The second example is in a culture where every leader desires to establish a ministry that grows and then supplies jobs and ministries for his children and other family members. The donor, if North American, assumes that the receiving Christian leader sees all people's rights as equal just like they do, but in most cultures that is just not true. Family members are favored over non-family members. So the funding meant to create a broad-based ministry ends up funding the leading family and all of the relatives in favor.

So is giving directly to local ministries always a poor investment? Of course not. But if the donor expects the funds to be used in a way that is consistent with the cultural grid of the donating country the funds must be managed by on-site people from the donating culture – in this case, a North American missionary.

Once again we come back to the basic rule of thumb in the Christian walk – obedience. If God leads you or your church to donate directly to a local ministry then you should obey, having the funds managed by on-site North American missionaries, if possible. If God leads you to support those on-site North American missionaries, then by all means, do so. And if God leads you to be involved in both, all the better!