MISSIONARY SUPPORT: SOME THOUGHTS

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If you have two sorts of workers, one who brings their own salary and another who have to be paid, then life is likely to get very complex!
Categories: Church: World, Observations

In polite society you should never talk about religion, politics or money. Well, I never claimed to be polite and this post is going to break two of those rules. I'm going to talk about "support" for missionaries; in the jargon of my world "support" almost always mean money.

Of course, this is a highly personal topic for us. If you click on this link, you can find out information about our support; among other things, you will read:

> *We do not receive a salary for the work we do with Wycliffe and our income is dependent on the goodwill of friends and churches around the world.*

The last time either of us received a salary was in 1984, since then, we have relied on friends, family and our supporting churches for all of our income. To be frank, this is a mixed blessing. On the plus side, it is a real privilege to know that people care about us and value the work that we do enough to give us a slice of their hard-earned income. It's hard to express how much we value this contact with our supporters. THANK YOU. On the other side of the balance, there are times when it would be nice to have the sort of regular income that comes from a normal job. However, the bottom line is that we have enough for our needs and to allow us to carry on our work, even after 31 years of this lifestyle.

But this post isn't about us.

Let's take a step back and think about missionary support in a broader context. This sort of personal support systemÂ is predicated there being people who have the means to actually support the missionaries. It works in the West and parts of Asia, but not so well elsewhere. Even then, there are struggles. It can be hard for people in the back-office to raise support. Churches are keen to get behind evangelists preaching the Gospel in some far flung region, but less happy to support a book-keeper who works in an office around the corner. This, despite the fact that the book-keeper is absolutely essential to the evangelist's work. The solution to this is for the mission agency to use central funds (often taken from the evangelist's support) to pay for essential work in the home country.

In fact, the same thing happens overseas, too. Local workers are rarely able to raise financial support and are generally paid salaries from central funds. It is important to remember that as the church grows around the world, local people are very often in responsible leadership roles for mission agencies; we aren't just talking about cleaners and cooks here.

What this boils down to, is that both at home and "on the field" there are two classes of worker, those who have to raise their own support and those who are paid salaries. This dichotomy raises some challenges that make me question whether this model of financing missions is actually viable or appropriate in our day and age. Here are a few points, which are not specific to any organisation or place.

- One advantage of personal support is that it tends to be maintained through periods of financial crisis. However, during these times central funds may dip and the only way to save money is to lay-off local staff. The total support costs of a missionary may be significantly higher than the salary paid to a local worker (who may well do a better job than the expatriate), but it is the local worker who will have to go.
- Employed staff have their rights and responsibilities covered by contracts and such like. Supported missionaries bring their own finance to the field and often act as though they are free agents, not only that, but they have to go home every few years to raise more support. It can actually be far easier and more efficient to run an office using local staff. But see the previous point; Agencies which work on the personal support model struggle to have sufficient funds for local staff.
- If salaried staff are incompetent, you can generally replace them with someone who can do the job. The process may be convoluted, but it can be done. If supported missionaries are incompetent (it happens, honest), there is much less that you can do.

Perhaps the most important problem is the distinction which exists between those who have to raise their support (who "live by faith" in the jargon) and those who are paid a salary. There is no doubt that in the minds of some people, the former are seen as superior, more holy than the latter. It's tripe, but people do think that way.

Thanks to the amazing generosity of our friends and churches, the personal support system has worked well for us for a long time. We have no complaints on a personal level. However, I have to ask whether this model is appropriate in a world where mission is no longer simply people from the rich world going to the rest. I don't have a solution, but the question needs to be raised.