MISSIONARY SUPPORT: STRUCTURAL ISSUES

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Categories: Mission, Observations

This is the second in a short series of posts on the issue of financial support for missionaries. If you are interested (or even if you are not), you can find the first one here.

In this post, I'll be considering some of the implications for churches and mission agencies of missionaries being required to raise their own financial support. In a follow up, I'll consider some of the implications for the missionaries themselves.

Many mission agencies have very little by way of central funds or source of direct income and they are not in a position to pay salaries for their staff. The rather counter-intuitive way that they work is that the missionaries themselves raise their own financial support and a proportion of this goes to cover the society's administrative costs (from which the missionary benefits). Effectively, the missionary pays the agency, rather than the other way round.

There are some agencies that do manage to pay staff salaries. However, these tend to be ones that are involved in project support; aid and development type agencies. If you are raising funds for poverty or disaster relief, you can use some of the money for administrative costs, including staff salaries. This tends not to work if you are raising money for church planting in Thailand (for example).

So back to the self-supported missionary.

Advantages of this System

- Over the years, it has proved to be an effective way of raising funds and personnel for mission work. The first post in this series suggested that the model might be creaking at the seams, today, but that doesn't deny its past effectiveness.
- It builds a close relationship between the supporters and the work of the mission agency. Good mission support involves much more than just sending money and the personal involvement encouraged by this system is a good thing.
- It spreads the burden of financial support around. If a church cannot afford to fully support a missionary (and most don't), the missionary can get on the road with a handful of leaflets and a PowerPoint presentation to raise more funds.

Disadvantages of The System

- Relationships and accountability become complex. When a missionary is supported by a multitude of people and churches, the notion of a "sending church" to whom they are accountable becomes blurred. As someone with a strong belief in the role of the sending or commissioning church, I find this very problematic.
- Agencies don't pay their staff, so they aren't fully in control of what they do. Sometimes it is impossible to move people into roles that they would be better suited for or which desperately need filling because a missionary's supporters would be opposed to such a move. On the other side of the equation, staff are sometimes placed in roles for which they are entirely unsuitable

because they happen to be available. There are times when vital roles go unfilled because the particular staff member is having difficulty raising their support.
- Missionaries play the system. It is not unknown for missionaries to play the agencies and their supporters off against each other so that they can continue to do what it is they want to do against the advice or wishes of one of the other parties.

Each of these points could be expanded and if the libel laws weren't as strict as they are, I could cite examples!

From the agency point of view, I think this question boils down to two simple statements (which may not make me popular in some agencies).

- I believe that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to effectively staff and manage a large, complexÂ organisation when you do not pay staff salaries.
- Agencies have not come up with a better way to finance long term mission work than the individual support system.