



RAISING LOCAL RESOURCES

Large Churches and Short-Term Teams

GLENN SCHWARTZ, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WORLD MISSION ASSOCIATES

There are days, after nearly thirty years of my current ministry, when I wonder who is listening to what we are saying about healthy sustainability for mission churches around the world. And then I get an e-mail that gives me a burst of inspiration. The following came from a mission executive who has a burden for what he sees happening:

I wish to applaud you for all of your efforts in raising the issue of dependency in the missions enterprise Although I believe that most mission organizations contributed to dependency for far too many years, I think the problem has been exponentially increased due to the approach many large churches have taken to missions in the past decade. It is their attitude of arrogance - due to ignorance of the missiological issues involved - that contributes to the problem. In addition, it is the incredible number of short-term teams they send and their high dollar projects that have caused greater problems than even those caused by mission agencies and long-term missionaries. I find that many in the missions world often do not even want to think about the issue of dependency because having to deal with it would greatly impact their projects and programs which involve a lot of dollars.

These are strong words regarding the current church and mission scene, but he graphically describes what I have observed for years. Why is it that so often that the larger our churches become, the less they seem to pay attention to the cultural lessons learned by missionaries and mission agencies over the years? It is far too easy to say, "We will do things our way. After all,

we have the people, the programs and the financial resources to make things happen - on our terms and schedule." Of course, this attitude fails to consider the long-term implications of the dependency seeds that are being sown.

You and I are living in a day when the trend is toward more short-term engagement that often does not (or cannot) include adequate time for language and culture studies. Little wonder that there are costly and inappropriate projects spread far and wide in the mission world. It forces one to think seriously about the cost of "doing missions" in a short-term way when the long-term results include prolonged dependency. Although it is expensive to send long-term missionaries from one country to another, consider the cost of short-term missions that may have little or no long-term mission impact.

But I can hear someone saying that short-term missions might have positive implications that may not be immediately recognized. This reminds me a bit of an experience I had in Central Africa in the 1960s when we were debating the effectiveness of some mission programs. One older missionary became defensive about what he was hearing and said something to this effect: "It is as if we toss a pebble in the pond and the ripples go out, and we may never see how far they go." The one leading the discussion quickly agreed with what the missionary said but added this: "You are right about the ripples going out, but that is not what we are talking about here today. We are concerned about tossing the pebble and missing the pond."

Let me hasten to add that not all large churches ignore training for short-term workers. Some have devised rigorous training programs before sending out teams. This may include reading books on cross-cultural ministry along with mentoring each candidate. Such churches also do a commendable job of debriefing the participants upon their return. May their kind increase!

I simply wish to remind leaders in churches, large and small, that the missionary enterprise by its nature is a cross-cultural effort. It requires humility, a teachable spirit and cultural sensitivity if we hope to "bear fruit that will last" (John 15:16 NIV). Otherwise, we may leave behind a situation that someone else, some day, will need to correct after the short-term team has gone home.

In my book *When Charity Destroys Dignity: Overcoming Unhealthy Dependency in the Christian Movement* I have an entire chapter (18) on short-term missions. I call that chapter "Maximizing the Benefits of Short-Term Missions." I attempt to show that I believe in short-term missions - having been a two-year volunteer myself in the 1960s in Africa. But what I am calling for today is a generous infusion of humility and cross-cultural sensitivity - the kind that most get by good training while only a very few seem to come by it naturally. f

I welcome response by e-mail at glennschwartz@wmausa.org.

**When Charity Destroys Dignity* is available by ordering online at www.wmausa.org.