

What are some dangerous pitfalls in funding mission?

All of us have heard horror stories about mission work that turned out to be a disaster. But the bigger problem is the horror stories that never got back to us! I have no doubt that every mission committee has given money to something that would deeply embarrass them if they really knew what was done with it.

If our mission committee is concerned about fiscal responsibility, not to mention theological integrity, what can we do to insure that money is used well? If we are new to the work of mission and naïve about what can happen, how can we guard against disasters that will turn our church against mission?

Here are several examples, but remember, there is not foolproof method of protection. Pray faithfully that the Holy Spirit will infuse your decisions with the wisdom of God:

- 1) *Different cultures understand money differently and have different rules when it comes to talking about money.*

A discussion at the Association of Presbyterian Mission Pastors (2002) was the occasion for the following story reported by Mark Hughes. It is not uncommon:

One group took a mission trip under a particular mission agency. While they were there, a local pastor invited them to come to his church for lunch. They anticipated that this would be a small informal setting. Instead, when they arrived, the whole church turned out to meet their car. The members had built arches of leaves and the driveway was lined with members waving palm branches. (We can see what's coming!) There was a worship service which included roles for the visitors. The group was honored by the congregation in worship and then taken to the mayor's house and paraded around town with much excitement. After all of the attention, they asked for money to help complete a new building.

American Christians would consider this brazen behavior unbecoming of Christian people. Maybe...but there are many cultures in which this is quite appropriate. We Americans might be the odd ones because we are too embarrassed to talk directly about money. (see David E. Maranz, *African Friends and Money Matters*) However, we do not want to be manipulated in our relationships with partners around the world.

- 1) *One of the most important contributions that American Christians can make to the cause of Christ around the world is support and encouragement for education.*

We have to be careful that we do not educate them into the biases and prejudices of our western cultural. We have much to contribute to education, but learning is not exempt from the sin of western Christians.

However, given that caution, our partners churches around the world will tell us that education is among the most prized commodities for them. I have been told by Sudanese Christian leaders that the way for us to avoid treating them in a paternalistic way is to support them in education. Among the most obvious ways to do this is to provide teachers, train teachers, and send scholarships.

However, one dangerous pitfall is the practice of providing scholarships to particular individuals of our choosing. Why? For a number of reasons:

- a. We do not know enough about the individuals and the social dynamics. We will naturally be attracted to the person who speaks English best or has the most compelling story or who is best able to get our attention. He/she may be without respect in the community. (Just choosing between “he” and “she” will be politically loaded.) The person chosen may be without respect in the community and one whom no one would put into a leadership position.
- b. Poor academic performance and the inability to follow through in the discipline of study may be a problem. Some of the most visible and assertive leaders are poor students. But, if we are providing the scholarship, we will be emotionally committed to him/her. We will support their candidacy for further education, even lacking good grades.
- c. If “our student” (and that is how he/she will be seen by the local church....not “their student,” but the “Americans’ project”) does not get passing grades, we will be inclined to put pressure on the school to fix things so that the student will succeed. There will be pressure to make special allowances.
- d. There will also be the inclination for privileges for our scholarship student. If he/she has extraordinary health problems, we will want to raise special funds to make possible extraordinary efforts to treat the person. He/she may be flown out of the country to receive the benefits of advanced western medicine.

That is only a taste of the potential problems. A much better approach is to provide a scholarship fund from which the church leadership assigns scholarships for individuals.

However, this is not an answer without dangers. The dangers may be fewer, but they are real. For example, decisions about who receives the scholarship may be based on church politics more than merit. (But is this unknown in the United States? We just have different biases applied in different ways.) So we can not guarantee perfection, but this has not prevented us from offering scholarships in our schools. Careful, open, and honest preparation along with prayer are our only hope for faithfulness.

In Shenango Presbytery's partnership with the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church, our partners tell us that their highest priority is education through Nile Theological College (NTC) where they train pastors and teachers. Our churches provide significant funds for NTC, but problems persist and we know that they will continue.

For example, students have no means of support for themselves or their families. There are no jobs for spouses of students. Many of them have to live some distance from the campus. So the school provides living expenses. This can quickly become a disincentive and an entitlement, just as it is in our culture. It is difficult to assign motives, but one can understand how it would be tempting to become a student in order to feed your family. And how could we blame them?

The administration of the school has struggled with the cultural expectation that relatives and tribal members will be hired, even for unnecessary jobs, because the need is so great for any source of income, however meager. This undermines the financial integrity of the school and its mission to educate. But cultural norms demand it. We also are gripped by cultural demands that are hard to resist. They are just different than African cultural demands.

What can we do? First, acknowledge our cultural blinders and stand with the Sudanese as they struggle with theirs.

2) *Another major pitfall in funding is the matter of paying pastors salaries.*

This might seem, at first glance, a wonderful way to support mission in poor countries. If we just pay for the pastor, he/she can do the work of an evangelist, teacher, pastor, etc.

And (some have argued), they are so much cheaper than American missionaries who, in the Presbyterian Church (USA), normally cost \$70,000 or more per couple per year. You can pay for 100 Sudanese pastors for that amount...and they speak the language! They will work in places that no American can live!

What are the problems with this? Essentially it is dependency. In the 19th century Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson, leaders of the two most important mission boards in the United States and England, developed the "3-self

principle.” They determined that all mission work should aim to establish churches that were:

- Self-governing (chose their own leaders and made their own decisions)
- Self-supporting (could pay for their own pastors without help from outside the country)
- Self-propagating (were able to invite people into the church and were able to send missionaries out to other ethnic groups)

Anderson and Venn believed that 3-self churches were authentic churches. If outside money pays the pastors, the 3-self principle will be violated.

What are some other problems with paying pastors and evangelists and teachers?

- We will naturally support the pastors who are best at communicating with us.
- There will be a lot of pressure on the pastors to “get their American sponsor.”
- Accountability for the pastor will come from us, not his/her peers or the church.
- The pastor will be known in the culture as someone who is paid by foreigners. It has been said that in Africa the first question asked is “Who pays you?” That will determine one’s basic allegiance. If foreigners pay the pastor, people are less likely to trust him/her in matters of faith and their ministry is more vulnerable.

3) There are more pitfalls, but the final one that I will mention is *the risks involved in congregation-to-congregation partnerships*.

These relationships are not impossible. In fact, there are many that work very well. But some of the problems are illustrated in #1 above.

We have decided in the Shenango Presbytery partnership in the Sudan to avoid these individual relationships between congregations for a variety of reasons:

- Communication is difficult since almost no one except the pastor (and often not even him) can speak English adequately. Heaven knows that we do not speak Arabic, Nuer, or a Nuba language!
- Mail is impossible between the US and the Sudan. Phones do not work well and are very expensive. E-mail is the only option, and very few Sudanese have access. Many of the homes or churches have no electricity.
- The disparity in wealth between us and them is so great that undue pressure would be put on Sudanese churches to “get their American congregation” which would provide dollars. And the competition would go both ways. Our churches would want the “best” Sudanese

church...surely not one in the displacement camps from which we would never hear.

This is not to suggest that simply sending financial support to the “national church” (which is usually anything but “national”) is a cure-all. Probably the best we can do is to make everything very public about the money that we give. There will always be political and economic dynamics at work on both the giving and receiving ends that will cause problems for we are all sinners.

Giving money for mission is impossible!!

By this time the frustrated reader must be screaming, “Is there any way to send money to mission overseas without creating a disaster?” In a sense, the answer is “no,” but that is far too cynical. Furthermore, we can not simply abdicate responsibility because the task is difficult.

The most comforting thing that I have ever heard on this matter is a quote from Kenneth Scott Latourette, the great mission historian of the first half of the 20th century. With his encyclopedic knowledge of how the Holy Spirit has worked through the history of the Christian movement, he said that the most exciting and dynamic times for mission were always “untidy.”

It may be taking the Apostle Paul out of context, but I would suggest that we add Latourette’s observation to Paul’s admonition to “sin boldly that grace may abound.” Ultimately there is nothing, humanly speaking, that we can do to guarantee that our money does not cause problems. But as wealthy people, there is no way to remove our money from the table in exercising our obligation and privilege of serving Christ. So we press on, praying for grace and forgiveness, trusting the Holy Spirit to use our meager efforts.