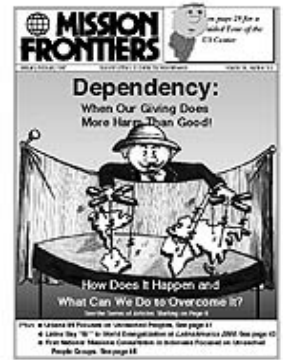


It's Time To Get Serious About
The Cycle Of Dependency in Africa
By Glenn Schwartz, Director of World Mission Associates Movement
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Some time ago I learned about a missionary to Africa who gave more than 20 years of his life primarily to create and manage church-run businesses. These were designed, among other things, to generate income to support the church. Some ten years following his retirement he returned to Africa to visit church leaders and other friends. To his dismay he discovered that his greatest contribution as a missionary--a church-run business--was now the church's biggest problem. That's not my conclusion. It is what he was told by the church leaders among whom he had worked.

In another case, a senior African leader of a rapidly growing denomination lamented that he has no time to disciple new believers or train the pastors who lead the churches. He said he rises daily to a long list of activities that have little or nothing to do with the growth of the church, adding that every major program was running an overdraft at the bank: medical work, theological training, literature ministry, and the farms left to the church from the colonial period. In exasperation he asked what he should do.

These two examples illustrate a problem that has hindered the church in East, Central and Southern Africa from joining the expanding non-Western missionary movement. Non-western churches in places such as India, Nigeria and Indonesia^{1} have started cross-cultural agencies and training programs and sent out missionaries. However, there are few, if any, from countries such as Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya and Zaire. Many churches in Central and East Africa are far from the joy of supporting themselves financially, let alone reaching out in cross-cultural evangelism.

Why does the church in some areas joyfully send out missionaries after only a decade or two while in other places it is difficult or impossible after a century or more? Is it because Africans are economically poor and lack the resources? Hardly. God has given Africa many sources, including money and highly qualified and gifted leaders. Some of their members own farms in rural areas, houses in urban areas, motor vehicles and sometimes TVs, VCRs and satellite dishes. Sometimes these same people, while their churches struggle with a bank overdraft, only drop a few coins in the collection plate. At the same time, some of these church members give expensive gifts at wedding receptions.

At the root of this syndrome there is an unhealthy dependence on foreign funding and, sometimes, foreign decision-making. In some cases mission-established churches received a form of Christianity which simply could not be reproduced.

Some will say that there have been many individuals who are sincerely dedicated to the Lord and who witness to their faith wherever they go. That is true many times over, and for every one of them we genuinely praise the Lord. Building a successful missionary program, however, does not rest on individuals alone. Like evangelism, it is most effective when it flows from the energized church as a whole. If the larger church is less than enthusiastic or living under the cloud of financial dependence, it will hardly send out its own people or overflow with missionary enthusiasm.

Speak to an overburdened church leader in some parts of Africa about the need to reach out in dynamic cross-cultural evangelism and he'll show you a long list of reasons why the missionary movement, as he knows it, cannot be reproduced. Indeed, he is a long way from joyfully participating in such a movement. If he were to launch a cross-cultural missionary program in his church, the first phase would probably be characterized by foreign subsidy, and phase two might need a bank overdraft to keep it going.

Wealth and poverty seem to have very little to do with breaking dependency, experiencing self-reliance, and creating an indigenous missionary movement. In both Malawi and Tanzania church leaders report that the poorer synods are the most likely to support their own programs and pastors. They may be peasant farmers who give their offerings in the form of cattle, bags of maize, or other produce. At the same time, the wealthier synods of the same churches remain dependent on overseas funding. That's why I conclude that financial independence has less to do with wealth and poverty than with a mentality of dependence that accompanied the spread of the gospel.

The kind of message and the nature of the accompanying structures have made it difficult for many in Central and East Africa to pass the message on, particularly in cross-cultural evangelism. But where Christianity can be reproduced successfully, cross-cultural evangelism is being carried on beyond ethnic borders. And so, while some churches have done well in evangelizing their own people, many have been less successful in cross-cultural evangelism.

The complex structure of the Christian movement introduced into many parts of Central and East Africa, built over many years with millions of dollars, pounds, and deutschmarks, has been hardly reproducible. The legendary "two shillings and six pence" required of believers in some areas bore no resemblance to the size and cost of the programs established in their midst.^{2}

Expatriate personnel during the colonial period ran the programs largely with foreign subsidy. How could they expect local believers to do it without the subsidy? Today in Central and East Africa, because of the weight of structures inherited from the past, church after church cannot even think of cross-cultural evangelism. Instead, church leaders are preoccupied with maintenance, indeed survival, rather than dynamic missionary outreach. They have little energy left to make cross-cultural

outreach a reality, let alone a spiritually rewarding adventure. In the end, local leaders look like poor managers, even failures, for not keeping elaborate programs going.{3}

Church-Run Businesses

Why don't believers in Central and East Africa pitch in and give offerings commensurate with the needs of their programs? One can hardly blame them.

In the first place, they did not create the enormous and expensive programs they inherited. Further, is it reasonable that they should put their tithes and offerings into treasuries being used to cover deficits in failing church-run businesses? Sometimes these businesses compete with church members who, as business people, are simply trying to make a living from the same kind of business. In some cases church members are expected to tithe to the church which is operating a church-run business that is their nearest competition.

Now that many Westerners have left, the church and mission landscape of Central and East Africa is replete with abandoned projects into which millions of dollars, pounds or deutschmarks have been poured. Concrete auto servicing pits between huge, welded-iron doors stand out like sore thumbs in places where there are no vehicles to be serviced. Sometimes one finds well-built cattle grids with no fence on either side, standing as quiet memorials to a past age.

Some churches in this part of Africa have been left with tens of thousands of acres of land without even a vehicle to drive from one end to the other. One such church has an overdraft of more than a million units of local currency. Is it any wonder that this church has not joyfully begun a cross-cultural missionary training and outreach program? Ironically, some businesses designed to produce income for the church are themselves now in need of subsidy. Sometimes they are kept going simply because they have been around a long time and no one has the courage or know-how to shut them down. Some continue under the fallacy that they could succeed with just a little more effort and some more foreign funding. But even if that were true, local believers would still not feel obligated to support the church with their tithes and offerings.

High Cost Of Subsidy

Perhaps one of the most lamentable aspects of irreproducible church and mission structures is that the enormous flow of outside funding is what actually helps to keep many churches "poor." Through the years believers often found that it was not necessary to put paper money into the church offering plate. They knew that if they sat back and waited long enough, funds would eventually come from an unseen source. Sooner or later, the church and its program would be rescued. Indeed, those who created the programs could not afford to let them fail. People of compassion would somehow find the money and close the gap, if for no other reason than to save the reputations of those who had started the programs in the first place.

Unfortunately, contrary to the belief which some Westerners hold that such days have passed, this rather bleak picture is real. In spite of all this, however, there are encouraging signs for church leaders in Central, East, and Southern Africa. Not all of the churches are mired in dependency. The Presbyterian Church in East Africa, the Lutheran Church in Tanzania, and the Assemblies of God in South Africa have discovered that dependence on foreign funding can be overcome. Some have not only begun to support their own programs, but they have learned the joy of sharing spiritually and materially with those beyond their borders.{4}

Move From Dependence

How do churches move from dependence on foreign funding to self-reliance? While recognizing that these problems did not appear over night and neither will their solutions, the first and sometimes most painful step for church leaders may be to say "no thank you" to the foreign funding that keeps them dependent. (This is especially difficult if foreign money has been paying local salaries.) The prospect of passing through lean months, even years, is not heartwarming for those who have become accustomed to a more comfortable lifestyle than they might otherwise have enjoyed. Those who were never dependent on foreign funding may, in fact, be better off than if their churches had been subsidized.

The testimony of church leaders who have made a successful transition may be the most encouraging source of hope. For many of these leaders, the newly discovered rewards of owning and operating their churches is worth the pain it takes to make the transition. However, there is also a fair number of defensive Westerners to whom one cannot look for encouragement. They fear that the work into which they have poured their lives will be destroyed.

During the time of the Reformation, Roman Christianity could not be reproduced in Northern Europe. It did not offer a satisfying religious experience, nor were its structures compatible with the areas into which the Christian movement would expand. The movement badly needed to be restructured and made indigenous. The Reformation in Northern Europe was that indigenization.

Aren't many churches in Central and East Africa still waiting for their own reformation and indigenization? When believers in this part of Africa make the Christian movement their own, they will more effectively join other Non-western churches in cross-cultural evangelism. May that day happen before the two forces representing a major challenge to Christians in Central and East Africa--Islam and Western materialism--overtake a dependent, paralyzed Christian movement.

END NOTES

1. See John Dekker *Torches of Joy* (West Chester Crossway Books 1985) and *Bridges* a newsletter on third World cross-cultural mission societies.
2. This mentality (sometimes known in Africa as the "ticket" system) is still quite alive and well within some denominations in Africa.
3. See "Church and Mission in Central Africa: A Missiological Study in Indigenization." Glenn Schwartz, 1989. Unpublished article available through World Mission Associates. 825 Darby Lane, Lancaster, Pa. 17601-2009.
4. See "From Dependency to Fulfillment" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, July, 1991.