

FOREIGN MISSION SUPPORT: EXIT STRATEGY

The purpose of this paper is to help a sponsoring or supporting church¹ develop an exit strategy for foreign mission national evangelists and local congregations. To exit from foreign mission points presents a tremendous challenge. It is obvious that a sponsoring church does not want to do anything to hinder or hard what the Lord has already accomplished in a mission work. Nor does the sponsoring church want to ignore the long-term past commitment of the foreign national missionary, his future in ministry and missions, and the future support needs of his family.

This paper is only a beginning point. It must be expanded by supporting congregations to include the history of the foreign mission effort, to understand how the congregation and the mission work got to the present point in the relationship, and to develop steps appropriate in the context of the work. Stated another way, exiting from a foreign mission work is the culmination of a process that spans several or many years and must be planned in context. The goal is to help the local church move from dependency to independence. This involves financial independence, but the exit strategy must also consider the capacity of the local church for doctrinal, emotional, spiritual, evangelistic, and missionary independence.

Many churches have begun or have become involved in mission efforts that include supporting foreign national evangelists on a full time basis. This kind of work is appealing when compared to the model that provides partial support for several mission points with little or no feedback or involvement in the work being done at those points. The support of foreign nationals is also appealing because the cost per worker is significantly less than the cost of putting a U.S. citizen in a foreign mission field.² One church estimated that it could support four national preachers for the same cost as sending one U.S. missionary. The low cost of supporting foreign national missionaries has led some churches to extensive mission involvement, at times in multiple locations with several missionaries. (One church I know supports 9 foreign nationals.)

Sometimes the foreign nationals are carefully selected and screened and the work plan is develop in concert with a supporting congregation. Other times, the foreign nationals simply come across the radar screen of a sponsoring congregation desiring to be involved in a mission work and are “picked up.” An important part of the exit process is to understand the beginning, especially the commitment of the sponsoring church. A sponsoring church should know

¹ In this paper, sponsoring or supporting church is used to describe the U.S. church and local church is used to describe the congregation on the mission field.

² Three factors are commonly cited for supporting foreign nationals, as opposed to supporting North American missionaries in a foreign country: (1) the national evangelist has no need to learn the language whereas the support of a U.S. missionary often includes a significant time devoted to learning the language, (2) the national evangelist has no need to learn the culture of his home country and is more likely to understand the culture of a neighboring country in his own region, whereas the time required for a North American missionary to learn, understand, and appreciate the culture often spans several years, and (3) it takes less financial resources to support a national in his own country or a neighboring country than to send and support a U.S. missionary.

whether their commitment is to the worker or to the work. These two options present significantly different dynamics in the development and future of a mission work. Of course, this commitment is ideally defined at the beginning of the relationship, but often this does not occur.

While many churches have become involved in supporting foreign nationals in mission works, there are several disadvantages. First, the sponsoring church usually has problems supervising the work. The problems include distance, cost of travel for onsite evaluations, difficulty of onsite evaluation with visits of limited duration, and communication and language barriers. The lack of good communication due to the language barrier is especially significant, recognizing that translation has its own difficulties even when done well. A related factor is lack of doctrinal certainty or confidence in the national worker. The nature of mission work changes significantly when there is no North American missionary presence. When the church supports (sends funds directly to) the worker and not the local church, other problems may arise. The worker may become independent of the local church and at times does not answer to the local church. The worker becomes the only line of communication with the sponsoring church, so that at times the sponsoring church hears what the worker wants to communicate. The local church is disenfranchised and does not accept ownership of the local work.

Therefore, churches must develop effective oversight strategies to fully understand and appreciate what is occurring at the mission point. A good suggestion is that representatives of the sponsoring church visit the national evangelist and local work onsite at least every other year. These visits should be extended visits insofar as possible, a minimum of 5-7 days, with the purpose of understanding and evaluating both the national worker and the local work. Longer visits may be advisable, depending on the teaching opportunities. There is at times a value in bringing the national worker to the U.S. to visit the sponsoring church (and this is more cost effective than sending 2-3 persons to visit the local work in the foreign mission field), but there are significant disadvantages. While the sponsoring church may develop a better relationship with the national worker, he may have to come to the U.S. without his family. Further, the sponsoring church does not have the opportunity to know what is occurring within the local church. It is important that the evaluation trips of the sponsoring churches provide opportunities to get to know each congregation and its members as well as to spend time with the national worker and his family.

One way to encapsulate some of the dynamics described above is to develop a written mission policy to guide the relationship with national workers. Such a policy serves to define the expectations of the sponsoring church. Typical policies address objectives, receptivity, and local congregational development through defined steps of mission work.

- **Objectives** include saving souls, making disciples of Christ, and establishing new churches.
- **Receptivity** seeks to take the gospel to those regions where people are most open or responsive to the gospel. Receptivity should include not only the initial development of the local congregation but the continued development of the local church.
- The customary expectation in **congregational development** is that the local church will become self-sustaining, self-governing, self-propagating, and self-edifying in the application of the Word of God, and that such will occur within a defined time period.

- **Self-sustaining** means the local church does not require outside financial support to do its work in worship, edification, teaching, evangelism, and benevolence.³ Such may or may not involve support of the local worker, depending on the defined tasks of the local worker. Where local workers are genuine evangelists working in multiple congregations, it may be possible that a U.S. church will support the multiple outreach efforts of the worker. On the other hand, if the local worker becomes a located minister with the majority of his responsibilities defined within the local church, U.S. churches are more likely to believe that the local church should financially support such efforts.
- **Self-governing** refers to developing autonomous local churches, biblically organized with qualified elders and other leaders. While many local churches have assumed some responsibility for planning congregational activities and are working together to plan and conduct, the goal of developing biblically organized self-governing local churches is seldom met.⁴ An important part of the development of self-governing local churches is that the national evangelist must not be the sole source of authority to manage and run the church. In a national church with elders, a question that often arises is whether a U.S. church or eldership can continue to directly support the national evangelist who is working for the national church or eldership. The alternative is that the U.S. church sends funds to the national church, but this has historically led to problems if a conflict arises between the national worker and the local church.
- **Self-propagating** means the congregation becomes a missionary church, able and willing to evangelize in their own community, and able to reach out with their own mission efforts to establish new churches. The key factor is that evangelism and mission is done through the efforts of the Christians in the local church.
- **Self-edifying** means that the local church has leaders and teachers capable of studying, understanding, applying, and explaining biblical teaching within the cultural context of the local church, so that the local church receives counsel and spiritual wisdom from within rather than depending on U.S. missionaries or continued visits from U.S. visitors.

A congregation wanting to exit from a foreign mission work must understand that the common response from the national worker or the local church in the mission field is simply to seek a new source of funding, that is, a new sponsoring church. Some supporting churches have exited the work only to find that other groups moved in and took over, sometimes with

³ In many mission points, reaching this goal will require biblical teaching concerning stewardship and generosity, because dependency and co-dependency relationships have been the norm for many years of mission work. While some think that self-sufficiency is an impossible goal in poorer countries, one can also point to denominational churches that have successfully established self-sustaining works in those countries.

⁴ Several factors are involved in the lack of self-governing churches: (1) there are not qualified leaders and efforts to develop such leaders are lacking, (2) the local preacher does not want biblical elders due to the threats to his own position or financial security in the relationship with the sponsoring church, (3) the members who are currently in charge and doing the work do not want elders or official leaders, (4) the church does not understand the biblical work of elders, (5) when qualified men are present they are not willing to accept the responsibility due to the expectations of the church or the possible negative impact on their family.

undesirable consequences. Remember that the goal is move the church from dependency to independence so that it is more likely the work will continue and flourish. Therefore, it is essential to train nationals about the dangers of dependency before exiting, because temptations will arise from others who want to feel needed and will gladly pick up the baton and provide money.

Some sponsoring churches have sought a solution in bringing the national worker to the U.S. for more training to prepare him for greater service in the mission field. As a reminder, the statistics are staggering when one looks at nationals who come to the US for religious training. Very, very few return to their home country to live and minister.

The following are recommendations for the congregation wanting to exit.

- Evaluate the current status of the work and lead the local congregation through a strategic planning process to determine mission, objectives, and specific strategies to reach the objectives. An important part of this process is to determine to what extent the members in the mission congregation are excited about and committed to the work, and whether their commitment extends beyond the funding from the U.S.
- More aggressively encourage mission congregations and leaders to use the local contribution for evangelism, campaigns, and other activities specifically designed for spiritual and numerical growth rather than only operational expenses.
- Meet with the leaders of mission congregations (not just the national worker) to encourage them to accept more responsibility for the direction of their congregation and planning for the future.
- Encourage the leaders to help the evangelist with ministry and mission costs (like car expenses), and with medical expenses and emergency expenses the evangelist may have from time to time.
- Consider conducting a seminar for the members (or at least the leaders and mission committee) of the supporting congregation.
- Determine whether the level of baptisms that is occurring through the sponsoring church support is sufficient to justify continued involvement, even with lack of congregational development on the mission field.
- Develop expectations and timetables for exiting, consistent with the situation in the local church and in consultation with the local leaders.
- Specifically train evangelists and leaders of the congregations before implementing the "exit strategy."
- Pray regularly about the challenge of developing an "exit strategy."

MISSION EXIT STRATEGIES: MISCELLANEOUS OBSERVATIONS

Some existing exit strategy models put extreme pressure on national church workers and local churches to become independent. The models range from immediate withdrawal of U.S. funding for the national evangelist to long term "weaning" of such funding. Obviously, immediate withdrawal of funds present overwhelming challenges for the local church and is seldom a God honoring alternative.

A frequent result of the exit of a U.S. sponsoring church is that the evangelist becomes a vocational worker, taking on a second job. This is not an unusual model in many mission points (both foreign and in the U.S.). The problem is that when one is called by God as an evangelist the second job is a distraction from this calling. (At times, the evangelist seeks a second job to fund family medical, transportation or other needs. Sometimes, this occurs without the knowledge of the sponsoring church.) A related point is that national workers may not be able to get a job if they are over 50 since many foreign countries do not have worker protection laws.

While providing direct support to a national worker may be necessary in the beginning, ideally support should go to the congregation's leaders and the national worker/evangelist should get his support from the congregation rather than directly from a sponsoring church. (A few national workers receive funding from multiple U.S. churches because there are no controls and accountability in place when funding goes directly to the national worker.)

Focusing attention on the leaders of local churches is a step toward an effective exit strategy. Exiting is very difficult and perhaps impossible if everything depends on the national worker.

If the leaders feel responsible for the direction and future of a local congregation, they can begin to determine their own destiny, especially in terms of the support of their preacher. This is part of becoming independent.