

Missions: Finances and Missions

By Bob Young

On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the church in Guatemala, the leaders of the Guatemalan churches assembled to celebrate, to reflect on the past, and to plan for the future. One of the topics addressed was the question of the continuing financial support from U.S. sister congregations. A Guatemalan church leader asked this question. "What would you think if you had a 50-year old son who is capable of working but continues to ask you for an allowance?" The parallel intended by this Guatemalan brother is obvious. There comes a time when churches that are planted should grow to maturity and learn self-dependence.¹

"Christians in the U.S. who provide salaries for African preachers believe they are doing the right thing. 'But unknown to them, they're slowly assassinating congregations'." Thus opens the first paragraph in a report concerning U.S. support of national preachers in Africa.² The article continues with a helpful treatment of the major issues. One, when elders or churches in the U.S. support a national preacher, genuine oversight is difficult. Communication is a challenge, and visiting the mission field can be quite expensive. Churches that support U.S. missionaries can expect regular furloughs and reports, but when that support goes to national preachers, language barriers and other obstacles often make it difficult for overseeing elderships to guide the work of the preacher they are supporting. Two, foreign money often contributes to a gap between the pulpit and the pew. The members have little, if any, control of their evangelist, and there is often a big economic discrepancy, with the preacher receiving much higher wages than the average church member. Preachers are not accountable to their members and often operate as independent contractors, moving to another church when they meet resistance. Three, foreign aid may stifle giving so that the national churches do not learn and practice the principles of biblical stewardship. The article suggests that the answer is not in stopping support, but in forming mutual project-driven partnerships. U.S. churches would do well to support churches rather than specific preachers for "intercultural, church-to-church partnerships."

I found the observation of the Guatemalan brother and the conclusions of the article especially relevant because I have been raising the same questions concerning mission work in Latin America.³ Given the fact that many U.S. churches are supporting national preachers for extended periods of time, one must ask whether the methods we are using are yielding the result we desire. Are we are building the church according to biblical principles? U.S. churches are often thrilled to learn that they can support a national preacher for 20-25% of the cost of sending a U.S. missionary to the same location. Further, national preachers may be immediately ready for service without the challenges of language and cultural adaptation. But many churches that start down this path have no exit or withdrawal strategy, and some national preachers are supported year after year. The Health Talents International (HTI) organization requires that national churches that are planted be self-sufficient.⁴

¹ This story was shared by Dan Coker, long time missionary in Guatemala, who was present for the fiftieth anniversary events.

² *Christian Chronicle* (Nov 2010), p. 1.

³ My interest in this question comes from two sources. One, I am interested in what I should recommend to elders and church leaders concerning supporting national preachers or various church planting efforts. Two, I am interested in the question because I serve as chairman of the board for Baxter Institute, a minister training school in Latin America, and we are continually challenged with the question of how our graduates can best serve.

⁴ *HTI Policy Handbook*, 2009.

At the 2010 Pan-American Lectureship, I heard for the first time two Latin American preachers speak out concerning the problem of U.S. dollars. According to these preachers, the practices of many U.S. churches are setting up unhealthy dependency (and co-dependency) relationships. These Central American brothers mentioned that U.S. money often contributes to internal problems, pulpit-pew conflicts, and a lack of member involvement and generosity. The dollars also take motivation and pride away from the Latin American churches. I concur with the conclusion of my Latin American preaching brothers: across three decades of supporting and working with foreign missions, I have seen countless church conflicts arise because of financial problems.

Soon after I returned home from the Pan-American Lectureships, I received a mission newsletter which contained the following statement:

Dependency upon the U.S. dollar has caused multiple problems. Dependency kills dignity, faith, vision, sacrifice, etc. When preacher support and buildings are funded from the U.S.A., a welfare state is produced. Typically, the preacher is paid three times the average salary. He becomes the pastor who is not accountable to the local church. The church is weak—never mature....

What is the answer? Let me share the suggestions which I received in conversations with the two Central American preachers I mentioned above. First, distinguish between helping the church with projects it cannot complete on its own and providing long-term support for things the church should handle on its own. Second, consider supporting only those projects that the church can sustain on its own if and when U.S. support is withdrawn or no longer available. Third, understand the importance of supporting the work instead of the preacher. This allows the church members ownership of the local congregation and also requires that the preacher be accountable to the local church.

The motto of Baxter Institute is taken from Matthew 10:16: wise as serpents, harmless as doves. At Baxter, we attempt to send forth ministers and missionaries who live out these two admonitions of Jesus. May we in the U.S. church likewise make these our goals as we consider our role in advancing the mission of God around the world: may we be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves!