

DEVELOPING HEALTHY, VIABLE CHURCHES

By Bob Young

I hear the phrase more and more: “when helping hurts.” A recent article suggested that many benevolence efforts, while they are well-meaning efforts to help, actually do more harm than good when one considers the long-term impact. In mission work, one must always keep in view the question: can our helping actually end up hurting?

The answer is yes. In various parts of Central America, we have wonderfully adequate church buildings that are filled with only a handful of members—a church building but no viable church. Many of the buildings were built by visiting US groups who provided the money and much, if not all, of the labor. The local Christians were only minimally involved, and made no personal sacrifice, commitment, or effort to make the building a reality. Sadly, in a limited number of cases, there are empty church buildings where no church is meeting in the building.

Over 20 years ago, Steve Saint, son of slain missionary Nate Saint, returned to the Ecuador jungle where his father had been killed. Over the 40 years since his father’s death, the local people, the Waodanis, had been blessed with lots of US support and dollars, but Steve Saint found no functioning Waodani church. (The story was popularized in the movie, “The End of the Spear.”)

Too often, mission efforts, especially short-term mission trips, do what the visiting group wants to do because the visitors are doing the planning, the funding, and most of the work. The needs of the local church, the ability and future of the local church members, is too often not considered. A few years ago I was in a certain Central American city at the same time a US group was there. I had some opportunity to interact with the group and they were celebrating the fact that they had set up 70 new Bible studies. I asked, “Who is going to teach the studies?” They said that the local church would do the follow-up. When I mentioned that the small church with which they were working had only 15 in regular attendance and that very few of them would be effective in teaching a Bible study, they seemed oblivious to my point. My fear was that the studies would be set up but that little if anything would be done to follow-up, and that future efforts to set up studies and share the gospel would meet greater resistance from potential students as a result of the negative experience of being disappointed when no one showed up to study.

An important principle of mission work is that the local church is as involved as possible in planning the activities. Otherwise, the local church becomes convinced that they cannot do the work without help. After all, they do not have the skills, the knowledge, the training, the resources, and the finances of the more capable North Americans. The result is that the work of the church in the mission field often fails to recruit and involve a majority of the work force available. When North American help, whether financial or in other forms, discourages the involvement, participation, buy-in, and investment of the local church—helping hurts!

My experience says that too often churches are established that never become capable of doing God's work on their own without outside assistance. Churches are established but fail to become healthy churches. Mission work must encourage and work toward the development of healthy churches. A healthy church is one capable of doing what God wants it to do at a certain stage of life. A baby can be healthy, even though it cannot walk or talk. But as the baby gets older, the inability to walk or talk will become a concern. So also, when churches are established and have existed for several years, the inability to do what God intends the church to do, or to be what God intends the church to be, is a sign of poor health. Healthy churches grow spiritually, developing spiritually healthy families and spiritually healthy members. A healthy church, as God presents the church in Scripture, is capable of self-government, is self-sustaining or self-supporting, is self-edifying, and is self-duplicating. Local churches on the mission field must be encouraged to become capable of planning and executing their own work. Developing this kind of church takes more time, but is healthier and results in stronger churches. Viable churches are capable of continuing and are not under constant threat of "going under."

This is the motivation for my mission ministry. I only go to places where the local church invites me, so I go where there is a desire for the focus I bring from Scripture. I depend on the local church to do the planning for the events and seek to involve them heavily at every step of the process. If a local church is not interested and is not willing to become a healthy church, I kindly refuse the invitation. The goal is to develop healthy churches, spiritually mature members, healthy families, spiritually minded church leaders. Developing healthy churches encourages the local church to take the responsibility for doing what God wants it to do in its own context at its own level of development and maturity. Churches must learn what the Bible says about self-government, the involvement and participation of the members, and personal sacrifice. Churches must be expected to become self-sustaining, regardless of the poverty or riches of the region. Churches function in their own context, and must become self-theologizing (studying and applying Scripture in their own context) and self-edifying. They must learn that God does not expect the local church to be always dependent on outside support.

I did not mind helping my children with their basic needs and with their education when they were children and adolescents. But my children are now adults, and I do not expect to have to continue to meet their basic needs and to assist with the basic aspects of their life. Let us help mission churches grow and mature, becoming healthy churches capable of doing God's will in their own context, according to their own gifts and the opportunities God provides.