

Rethinking Our Missions Methodology

During the nearly two decades I spent working as a missionary, it was my privilege to work alongside called and anointed Ugandan believers, nearly all of whom were living under the heavy burden of extreme poverty. My approach was to mobilize funding from churches and concerned individuals in the States which was then used to buy land, help build buildings, support national ministers, and subsidize other activities. This seemed to generally be the way missions worked in the 80s and the 90s, and those of us that were there know that in many if not most cases there was a dependence on funding from wealthy overseas churches. Even though this might not have been the best way to do things, a great harvest of souls was reaped during those years.

My wife and I were recently in a conference in Uganda with approximately 100 African ministers from five different nations. In addition to planning and strategizing for future outreach, I wanted to hear from them. When they shared their hearts with me, 90% of their input seemed to always revolve around the issue of financial provision and the horrible toll poverty has taken on their families and congregations. We even found out another 100 ministers we invited were unable to attend the conference because they simply could not afford the cost of bus fare. One Ugandan pastor said, "The poorest are the ministers of the gospel. Many in our nation believe the church is just for poor people." Hearing this broke my heart. They were poor when I first met them in the early 80's, and most of them are still poor. I know it's God's will for them to prosper, so what went wrong?

The question we must ask is, are we helping or hurting the situation if we perpetuate a system in which the national churches become overly dependent on the financial support of the American church? I believe missions must always have as its goal the empowerment of the national. While that does require making some investments, in most cases we have embraced a "perpetual donor-mentality" in which the American churches are expected to build the buildings, pay the bills, support the nationals, and feel guilty if they don't. Our intentions may be honorable, but this method has created in effect a welfare state among whole segments of the African church, which is an injustice to them and stifles their gifting and creativity. Yes, our American churches must continue to support world missions, and even find ways to do more. But we must give wisely, because if what we are doing has contributed to the African Church remaining in poverty, then it is time to rethink our missions methodology.

Regarding the great physical needs of the African Church, it is time to realize that poverty does not respond to hand-outs. Poverty is not alleviated by giving and giving and creating dependency among the poor. The fact is, poverty in African churches will persist unless we change our methodology. An example of what I am talking about is "microfinance", a business-based solution for alleviated poverty that does not create dependency and follows the principle of empowerment. As opposed to perpetual donor aid, microfinance makes small business loans to the poor which empowers them to lift themselves out of poverty. This is one exciting example of effectively partnering with the nationals to bring about lasting and sustainable change in what they have identified as their greatest area of need.

I pray the Church in America is willing to rethink how it does missions and embrace new methodologies that will through partnership with the nationals bring new levels of empowerment into their lives, and ministries. Microfinance is one of those new methodologies we must utilize to help the African Church break the yoke of poverty and reach their nations for Christ.