

Missions and Money—Again!
By Bob Young
February 2009

The current economic downturn has everyone concerned. None are more concerned, nor should be more concerned, than those who are involved in mission work around the world and are heavily dependent upon North America funds for continued operation. The warnings that have been sounded over the last 20 years against heavy dependence on North American funds now echo ominously. I received an email this week from a long-time missionary who is returning to the States for six months in 2009 in order to raise funds.

We may soon see the folly of the sense of entitlement that is at very core of Western missionary thinking. A sense of entitlement has influenced the expectations of missionaries with regard to remuneration; a sense of entitlement has spread to the nationals who have been heavily influenced by entitlement thinking. Expectations are high, are getting higher, and are perhaps near bursting, given the current economic downturn. The entitlement problem plagues us in various ways. Discrepancies between the resources of those on U.S. support and the average economic level of those we try to reach has cost us in failure to establish deep, trusting relationships, in failure to communicate effectively, in failure to develop culturally-consistent and sustainable strategies, and in our failure to model the attitude and spirit of our Lord in caring not for material things.

These challenges are so great that it may be difficult to find our way out. Yet we must find our way out because the approach we are taking is likely not sustainable, either in the diminishing resources available stateside or in the numbers of missionaries that need to be sent. When we find our way out, we may be amazed to see the change in the way those we desire to reach see us.

Mission works must ask whether what is being done is sustainable by the locals in the absence of North American personnel or resources. If not, changes are due immediately! Mission works that fail to ask this question may find themselves doomed. Mission works must ask what is the most economical and effective way to accomplish the task. In the influence of the North American world of bigger is better, and bigger bang with bigger bucks, the simple creativity of the locals often gets lost. There is often a better way, but few are asking what it is.

We must refocus on our purpose and be certain the peripheral is not distracting us. We must avoid affluence-dependent strategies that cannot be sustained in our absence. We must seek shared ownership and asap transfer of responsibilities with the nationals. We must demand that long-range strategies not be dependent on U.S. funding. Such efforts will not be without pain. Such efforts may yield great reward as the gospel goes to the poor and needy, taken by those who understand the culture and understand that the gospel is good news for spiritual poverty first, and solving the problems of this world second.