

MISSION CHURCHES: SELF-RELIANCE VS. DEPENDENCE

It is commonly voiced among U.S. churches that every mission congregation should be able to become self-reliant or self-sustaining financially. The logic is that a limited number of families (15-20) should be able to support a full time worker on a level equal to the average salary of the members.

As one searches for Bible examples, we find that several new congregations were established on Paul's first mission journey (Acts 13-14). It appears that all these were self-governing with their own leadership by the end of the journey (Acts 14:21-23). On Paul's second mission journey (Acts 16-18) he revisited some of the churches established on the first journey, and then traveled onward to establish churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and Corinth. We have a record of the financial help provided one mission church (Phil. 4:14-16, 18-19). Was Philippi an unusually wealthy church? In 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, Paul observed that the Macedonian churches participated in the offering for the poor in Jerusalem out of severe trial and extreme poverty. Did this include the Macedonian church at Philippi?

Several factors are commonly cited in favor of developing self-sufficient congregations. When a congregation looks to external funding sources to provide a preacher, building or work fund, the usual result is dependency. Other factors can be seen in a comparison of dependent churches and self-sustaining churches.

In dependent churches, the development of responsibility is hindered, the need for local members to give generously to support the work is diminished, the local church does not have a sense of receiving blessings as a result of generosity and sacrifice, the focus is more on the supporting church than the local church, faith is in the supporting church more than in God, the focus is inward on what is received rather than outward on what is given, self-respect is diminished. And ultimately, the mission funds of the supporting church are often spent with minimal results.

In self sufficient churches, the development of responsibility is accelerated, the need to give is maximized, the local church connects the blessings received with their generosity and sacrifice, the focus is on the work of the local church, faith is God and what he is doing in the local church, the focus is outward as the local church considers how it can do the will of God and serve others, self-respect is built. Finally, the supporting church is able to plant more churches as dedicated funds are used effectively in place after place.

What is an appropriate process for helping local churches move toward self-sufficiency or independence? Can all mission churches become self-sufficient when they are guided through the development of generous stewardship? If not, why not? What things are lacking in the development of self-sufficient mission churches? What are the responsibilities of the sponsoring churches to facilitate the process?