

Why Ask Missionaries to Beg? Here Is An Alternative

by Phil Parshall

Consider this ad:

Wanted: Pastor for a thriving church in the Midwest. Applicant must be a college graduate and preferably seminary trained. Personal qualities should include linguistic competence, cultural sensitivity, humility, and a disdain for the things of this world. The prospective pastor will be required to solicit salary pledges (as well as moving expenses) from among our church members. This process will take approximately 18 months, during which the pastor and his family must live "by faith." If interested in this exciting opportunity, write today for our ten-page application form.

Anyone reading this fictitious advertisement is likely to smile; surely no pastor worth his salt would even consider this offer. Most pastors would feel degraded by such a demand.

But change a few words in the ad: Replace pastor with missionary. Make the Midwest read Japan. Suddenly it all makes sense. This kind of "opportunity," with its demeaning method of raising support, is reserved for the foreign missionary.

Something is wrong, and it needs to be addressed.

In my 28 years of active Christian service, I have never met a missionary who relishes the responsibility and hassle of this financial aspect of missionary work. We end up feeling we are a strange breed of sanctified beggars, not unlike the Buddhist monks I have observed making the rounds of Bangkok shops with their bowls. Some will defend the system, pointing to the deepened faith missionaries gain from "trusting the Lord" for required pledges. While not denying this, I still ask, "If the system is so great, why don't American churches adopt it for their pastors?"

I never felt any intense spiritual vibes as a 22-year-old novice, trying to instill enthusiasm in the saints to support my work. But I can remember feeling shame and humiliation, especially when I was asked repeatedly when my wife and I were actually going to depart for Bangladesh. I wanted to reply, "We'll leave as soon as you and others meet our support needs."

With gratitude I can say my support raising activity lasted only eight months. But I have seen many sharp, well-educated, young people cringe at the thought of laying their needs before friends and potential supporters.

The system of voluntary support has benefits, of course. The close relationship between supporters and those supported, for example, is special. This is often missing when missionaries are supported from a denominational budget.

But we could reduce the fear, hassle, and shame of soliciting in the present system without sacrificing this benefit. We could, that is, if Christian laypersons and churches began to treat our missionaries' financial needs as they do their own pastors.' After "approving" their missionary, they could assume complete responsibility for

his or her financial needs. This may not always be possible for one church, of course. But it could be undertaken by a consortium of five or six churches in one area.

My home church, Highland Park Baptist Church is suburban Detroit, has pioneered such an approach. Any approved young person growing up in one of the five consortium churches can feel assured of a complete support base if the Lord calls him or her to be a missionary. There is no need, then, for the missionary to travel across the United States seeking support from 30 to 40 churches and individuals.

I appeal to our mission-minded churches and lay-people to think anew about innovative procedures that can lift an increasingly heavy burden from the backs of missionaries. If they do, our mission boards will also be freed from spending time defending a financial system that often repels rather than attracts the best from our Bible colleges and seminaries.

Phil Parshall serves as a missions administrator with SIM and is based in Manila. This article reprinted by permission from Christianity Today, 1990.