

# Indigenous Missions

By Paul Washer

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## Fulfilling the Great Commission

How do we fulfill the Great Commission? There are two distinct mission strategies that we must consider. They are very different, but not in opposition. We need not think that we must use one to the exclusion of the other. Both are viable in their own right and should be employed to fulfill the Great Commission. These two mission strategies are:

**A Cross-Cultural Mission Strategy** - This is the traditional strategy for doing missions, whereby missionaries are sent to a nation, people group, or culture outside their own. Example: A North American missionary agency sending and supporting a North American missionary to Eastern Europe.

**An Indigenous Mission Strategy** - This strategy does not send missionaries from one nation, people group, or culture to another, but works through missionaries that are native to the country in which they are ministering. Example: A North American missionary agency providing the support for a Romanian missionary to work in Romania among his own people.

## Cross-Cultural Missions

The Church has a long and glorious history of cross-cultural missions. The apostle Paul was a cross-cultural missionary in that he went outside his own people, the Jews, and outside his own country, Israel, and preached the Gospel to the Gentiles. William Carey and Amy Carmichael in India, Hudson Taylor in China, and David Livingstone in Africa are all examples of cross-cultural missionaries.

It is not difficult to see that cross-cultural mission work is indispensable to the Great Commission. How can a people group who is entirely without the Gospel come to a saving knowledge of Christ unless missionaries from another culture are sent to them? The apostle Paul writes in Romans 10:14-15:

*“How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!’”*  
(NASB)

Cross-cultural missions are biblical, historical, and necessary wherever there exists a people group completely devoid of

the Gospel message or where the Church is still struggling to take root in a culture or people group. In many areas of the world today, there are entire people groups that have no knowledge of Christ. For them to be reached, Christians must leave their own peoples and lands and go to them, bearing the Good News.

## Indigenous Missions

After two thousand years of missionary activity, over half the world has still not heard the Gospel. The traditional mission method of only training and financing North American and Western European missionaries is not sufficient in itself to reach the world. There are simply not enough missionaries or available economic resources from the West to reach all the nations of the world! A solution to this problem is to support indigenous or native missionaries to work within their own countries and people groups.

As a result of two millennia of cross-cultural missionary work, there are untold millions of Christians throughout the world. Dedicated to God, knowledgeable of the Scriptures, and with a burning zeal for the lost, they often suffer great hardship, risking life and personal welfare to preach the Gospel to their own people. The indigenous or native missionary strategy recognizes the worth and usefulness of this great body of native believers and seeks to provide the training and financial support necessary for them to reach their own people.

## How It All Began

Several years ago while I was serving as a missionary in Peru, I was an eyewitness of the great advancement of the Gospel through many indigenous workers in spite of their severe poverty. I began to pray and search the Scriptures regarding my proper response to such choice servants and their need. In III John 1:5-8, I found a compelling teaching:

*“Beloved, you are acting faithfully in whatever you accomplish for the brethren, and especially when they are strangers; and they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. For they went out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support such men, so that we may be fellow workers with the truth”*  
(NASB)

As I read through this passage, I began to ask myself how its admonition should be applied. Should North Americans send only North American missionaries on their way in a manner worthy of God? Was it biblical for North Americans and Western European Christians to help indigenous missionaries outside of their own countries and cultures? Should the abundance in the West be used to help indigenous missionaries in less prosperous countries and people groups?

### Opposition and Answers

As I began to discuss this idea with other North American missionaries, I met with some opposition. I often heard that if indigenous missionaries were given economic support from the West, they would become dependent, or it would spoil them, or they would become lazy. I was also given many examples of western missionaries who had supported indigenous missionaries with little or no success.

As I carefully considered the objections and the examples of failure, I began to see serious flaws in the arguments that had been given to me. First, I never heard a North American missionary tell a church to withhold support from him because he was afraid that too much support might make him dependent, spoiled, or lazy. Secondly, there are many missionaries from North America and Western Europe who are extremely ineffective, apathetic, and who do not even believe in the authority of Scripture. Should we stop sending missionaries to the foreign field simply because some are unworthy? Thirdly, the countless stories of failed attempts placed the blame solely upon the indigenous missionaries, but failed to see the other obvious reasons for failure:

1. Those who were supported did not measure up to the qualifications of a minister given to us in the third chapter of First Timothy. They should have never been supported in the first place. The foreign missionary who supported them was as much at fault as the unqualified national. For this reason, the Scriptures warn us not to lay our hands too hastily upon anyone (I Timothy 5:22).
2. Those who were supported did not demonstrate the validity of their calling. They were not men who were diligent to present themselves approved to God as workmen who do not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the Word of Truth (II Timothy 2:15). They were not working in the harvest prior to a promise of support. They were hirelings who were unwilling to work in the harvest unless they had the promise of support.
3. The indigenous missionary was often hired by the foreign missionary to act as a servant to do his will. I have seen indigenous missionaries who were called by God to preach

the Gospel reduced down to nothing more than a house boy hired to wash the foreign missionary's car, clean the missionary compound, and take the missionary's wife shopping at the market.

4. The foreign missionaries who supposedly attempted to support indigenous missionaries neglected to involve the local church. The foreign missionary alone does not have the right to call out, approve, or send out missionaries. This is the work of the local church and its elders. I found it interesting that the local church was never really involved in most of these cases that failed.

As I studied the failed attempts to support indigenous missionaries, I began to see that the blame lay primarily at the feet of those foreign missionaries and foreign missionary agencies that approved them. The failure was not the result of supporting indigenous missionaries, but the result of violating countless biblical principles and the masked prejudice of some foreign missionaries who treated the indigenous missionaries as inferior. As I considered the Scriptures, I began to see how churches in the more developed nations might support indigenous missionaries outside the West.

### Indigenous Missions and the Local Church

As I considered the support of indigenous missionaries, the one truth that kept coming to the forefront was this: The indigenous local church and its elders must be the key players in the work. It is not wise to support indigenous missionaries in a country, people group, or geographical area unless God opens the door to work through indigenous pastors, local churches, and/or a fellowship of churches that have an established and enduring reputation (national or even international reputation).

The HeartCry work in Zambia is an excellent example of this principle. Conrad Mbewe of Zambia is a highly respected pastor whose reputation extends far beyond his own country. He and his church are responsible for training the missionary candidates, ordaining them, sending them forth, and holding them accountable on the field. The demands they place upon their missionaries and the degree of accountability to which they hold them far exceeds most, if not all, other missionary-sending agencies. They have the expertise to train missionaries, the endurance to work beside them in the field, and the wisdom and boldness to hold them accountable. What they lack are the financial resources that can be found in the West. The HeartCry Missionary Society works with men like Pastor Mbewe to provide what is lacking so that the Great Commission might be fulfilled.

The need to work through local indigenous churches and their elders cannot be exaggerated. Many pastors and other

concerned Christians from the West sometimes visit third world countries and see the economic poverty of the churches and their ministers. They return to their home churches in the West and enthusiastically raise money to support the indigenous missionaries they have known for only a few days. Sometimes it works out and the Kingdom of God is advanced, but more often, the whole enterprise ends in discouragement. A few months of correspondence begins to reveal the true character of the missionary. He is not as qualified, not as dedicated, and not as selfless as first supposed. Support from the West has not corrupted this indigenous missionary, but it has simply revealed that he was not qualified to begin with. The pastor from the West was wrong in recommending a man that he had known for only a few days and that he could not hold accountable on the field.

We often fail to realize that missions must be guided by the principles found in God's Word and not by enthusiasm, sentimentalism, or romanticism. Men and women should be supported only after careful and prolonged scrutiny. They must have a solid testimony and a strong reputation among the churches and elders who know them best. We must never forget that a foreigner is easy to deceive. Throughout America's history, we find unscrupulous people who have made fortunes by deceiving the immigrants who came here from other countries. It is a simple truth that anyone is more susceptible to deception when coming to a land where the language and culture are not their own. Well-meaning Christians are often the most susceptible to such deception. For these reasons and many more, the support of indigenous missionaries must involve indigenous churches and elders with long-standing and worthy reputations. It is easy for a Peruvian candidate to deceive a North American Christian for a few days, but it is nearly impossible for him to deceive a biblical and Spirit-filled group of Peruvian pastors who have scrutinized his life in the light of the Scriptures for an extended period of time.

### Frequently Asked Questions

We have seen the advantages of sending and supporting indigenous or native missionaries. In the following, we will consider a few frequently asked questions:

**1. Are cross-cultural missionaries still needed on the mission field?** Of course, they are! The indigenous missionary strategy does not eliminate the need for cross-cultural missionaries. This is not an either/or, but a both/and situation. We are not arguing for a moratorium on North American and Western European missionaries, but fully recognize the need for thousands more on the field! We are simply seeking to prove that the indigenous missionary strategy is an equally viable, and in some cases, more effective missionary method.

**2. Will you spoil the native missionary by supporting him with American money?** The first thing we need to understand is that there is no such thing as American money. It is all God's money. If we are prosperous in America, it is so that we might wisely use what God has given us for the advancement of His Kingdom. Secondly, the support given to the indigenous missionaries is adjusted according to the average income of the population. If the average income in a country is \$150 a month, then that is the support given. The support that is received provides no luxuries, but gives enough economic freedom so that the missionary might work full-time in the ministry. Thirdly, we do not hire men so that they might work in the mission field, but we support men who have already given themselves to the work and would continue whether they received outside help or not. Fourthly, we find this objection about spoiling native missionaries with a \$100 a month salary amusing in light of the fact that some missionary board and denomination executives in the United States make over \$100,000 in annual salary.

**3. Why don't the churches in these countries support their own missionaries?** This is a good question. The ultimate goal is always that the churches in a given country send and support their own missionaries, but many countries have been devastated by famine, war, and years of political corruption. The Christians in these countries often suffer unbelievable poverty and sacrifice to preach the Gospel and plant churches. The support from the outside simply helps them with this task. At this moment, in countless countries around the world, there are a multitude of men and women who work 16-hour days to feed their families with less than \$100 a month. When they are not working, they are preaching the Gospel and planting churches. The outside support simply enables them to invest those 16 hours in the Lord's work instead of in a factory!

**4. How can a native missionary be as qualified as the American missionaries with a university or seminary education?** That depends on what you consider the qualifications to be. Do you measure a man of God by a diploma from a university, or by biblical knowledge, godliness, the Spirit's power, and zeal? In my ten years as a missionary in Peru, I met indigenous missionaries of whom the world is not worthy. These are men who would stand for hours and preach while being mocked and beaten and having goat urine poured on their heads. They would preach until their persecutors grew tired, sat down, and listened! I know men who look like toothless, sandal-footed beggars, and yet they have started ten or fifteen churches. One of the greatest examples of the truly qualified missionary is Angel Colmenares of Peru. He is an indigenous missionary who has been used

of God in a movement that has left hundreds of churches in its wake. Several years ago I asked a friend to accompany Angel and me to a Bible conference among the mountain people of the Northern Andes. He accepted even though he was scheduled to travel to Brazil to attend a conference advertised as “the greatest gathering of missionary minds and strategists in the history of South America.” Before the Bible conference, my friend and I accompanied Angel as he walked through a garbage dump looking for a discarded car battery that he hoped he could use to power his microphone for open air preaching. As we walked through the garbage, my friend looked at me and said, “I was scheduled to go to the greatest gathering of missionary minds and strategists in the history of South America, but here I am walking around in this garbage with you and this little beggar of a man who has started more churches than all those mission experts put together!”

### Governing Principles

The most important principles that govern HeartCry’s relationship with the indigenous churches and missionaries we sponsor are set forth in the following statements:

- HeartCry will not work independently of the indigenous churches on the mission field or their leadership, but will work in partnership with them. It is not HeartCry’s purpose to support its own “HeartCry missionaries” throughout the world, but to assist indigenous churches in sending forth their own missionaries and planting new churches.

- HeartCry will join with the indigenous churches and their leadership in the selection of the missionaries. Our main concerns in the selection of missionaries are doctrine, godliness, calling, and zeal.

- HeartCry will provide indigenous churches with the funds necessary to support individual missionaries for a predetermined period of time. After such a time, the missionary’s life and work will be reevaluated. Support may be continued, increased, or decreased according to the need.

- HeartCry will work with indigenous churches and their elders to determine the monthly support for each missionary. The amount of support will be based upon the average income in each country.

- Accountability will be the number one priority after a missionary is commissioned. HeartCry will work in cooperation with the sending church and its elders to oversee the missionary on the field.

- HeartCry will seek to contribute to the continued theological and ministerial training of the missionaries it sponsors. This will be accomplished through such things as Bible conferences, literature distribution, and theological training by extension.

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