

The Blind Side of Missions.

Importance of missions: How can we measure the effects of missions?

In the past ten years, more religious foreign missionaries are serving in third world countries focusing on the lack of food, housing, education and employment. Some actions that help the poor include establishing educational programs; scholarships or sponsorships, medical groups providing free care and medicine to the least of these, construction of water wells, home refurbishments and construction for the homeless. These opportunities provide hope for a better life, encouragement to seek a healthier spiritual life as well as an opportunity for low cost medical care.

Has it all been positive?

Despite the good intentions of most ministries and religious organizations, there have been some negative effects to the intended recipients. Dr. Robert Lupton addresses this in his book, "Toxic Charity." Giving to those in need what they could be gaining from their own initiative may well be the kindest way to destroy people. The distribution of food to the poor does not solve the lack of employment. Unfortunately it only creates dependency.

Education is one important tool required for a better chance to break the cycle of poverty. One of many approaches has been establishing sponsorship programs. What is not seen in the administration of these programs, despite the generous intention, is the obstacle it can become for locals. Foreigners volunteer to perform a job that a local could do to earn a living. Eg: foreigners carrying out sponsorship programs. Many organizations want locals to have a chance to get better jobs through education. While there are locals academically qualified (such as business administrators, teachers, social workers, etc), outsiders take positions they may not be qualified, especially when there is lack of knowledge of the local culture.

One of the most common sources of employment found in poor urban communities is construction (eg: painting, digging, etc). Masons, painters, and other human resources are waiting for the chance to be employed to be part of the staff to build, fix or improve a building. Most religious oriented organizations bring groups with the mindset that what they are doing will help the community. However this only provides a false sense of accomplishment for the provider without helping the local economy. On the other hand, when a local asks for a chance to work, they are expected to volunteer and work for free. Unfortunately this doesn't allow them to provide for their families. Reward is always recommended or the vision of help is lost.

Lastly in the religious aspect, some of the activities performed by missionaries, eg: crusades, door to door evangelism, feeding programs may be harmful when they don't have knowledge about the culture. Eg: can you imagine a ministry in Brazil led by a Chinese missionary, who speaks little Portuguese and whose culture is different from Brazilians? Some of these programs are developed taking into account only an area with specific religious beliefs of a church member. The outcome is almost the same: exclusion of part of the community due to different theology. Therefore people become church members more for convenience and benefits (eg: sponsorship for kids, food, clothing, etc), than an agreement in faith. Religion is becoming a business. More churches are being founded in small POOR communities because they are able to obtain foreign aid to operate the church.

What is not being said.

All communities are active entities. The goal of every member in a community is to improve their life in every single aspect such as: academic, spiritual, health, economic and professional; to provide a better quality of life for the individual, their family members and the entire community. What has occurred in the past causes social phenomenon that jeopardize the future of a community:

- **Dependency:** In locals is easily acquired when missions are focused on providing things for community people that can be done for themselves. People lose their initiative to solve issues, by themselves. It decreases their self-esteem because the mindset: "I can't do it ..." "I need their help..." Is planted. The outcome of food bag delivery eliminates or decreases the interest or initiative to look for a job so the basic needs can be met. Feeding centers provide meals for kids but few of them interact with parents and encourage them to be the role model for their kids. The pattern set is: "I don't need to worry about providing meals in my house because a foreigner will bring it to me. I can keep drinking alcohol because they are feeding my kids." Or even worse "wow I can have more kids because they will feed them", etc.

- **Underdevelopment:** An image of a dirty and poor community moves the heart of people more than a clean and prosperous community. Some local leaders (spiritual/political), in order to gain favor from donors, detail the needs in their area or facility; without mentioning the lack of employment. With the lack of knowledge and education in community development, some people present a wish list of things they might already have. Eg: to build a clinic when another is working close by. Most entities promote poverty, on their web sites, as a hook to get more funds or more people to do missions. Another example is full time missionaries in job positions that members of a community with adequate skills could perform to earn a living. In addition, they focus on paying locals according to the reality of the country and not based on the value of the work, effort and knowledge of the employed, eg: government institutions pay a fair fee to medical interpreters based on the value of the work but religious entities focused on the foreign country's minimum wage.
- **Division:** As benefits are focused to specific groups or with specific criteria, a division is created among the people of the communities. Sometimes benefits don't reach the most needed. However the ones who please the donors (eg: obligated attendance to church to be sponsored) gain the rewards. This division is mainly caused when there is a religious purpose.

Hidden effects and misconceptions.

Most full time missionaries come from first world countries which in most cases lead them to think they should be worshiped because they moved to a third world country. This topic is covered in depth by Jonathan Trotter on his article "The Idolatry of Missions" (<http://www.alifeoverseas.com/the-idolatry-of-missions/>). As more foreigners move into third world countries the cost of living increases. Housing, for example, gets more expensive as the target market are the foreigners who have higher income either to buy or rent. Special bilingual schools are founded to comply with the demand of foreigners which increase the cost of quality education for locals.

Foreigners immigrate with different approaches, some as missionaries and some as entrepreneurs for their businesses. The difference between both is that one creates jobs. Nevertheless, none of them are fair and equitable to locals as discussed in the book "Turismo Placebo" written based on data obtained from research carried out by a variety of investigators at different universities and edited by Ernest Cañada, PhD and Macià Blázquez, PhD.

Pursuing the "American Dream".

This expression is commonly referred to foreigners (not North Americans) that move to the United States and succeed. Unfortunately the experience most people find has been quite the opposite due to their illegal status. Although some of them have immigrated to North America legally, few have been able to reach that dream of improving their lives. It's a goal that involves sacrifices, humiliations, and sometimes death, all this for a better future that cannot be pursued in their own country.

Is there any way for this dream to come true in a third world country? It may sound harsh but it is possible for entrepreneurs and missionaries who move from first world countries... Some of the reasons include: 1- Foreigners bring dollars (US\$) or euros (€) and pay in local currency which may convert to upwards of 20 times more money... 2- Life in the third world country is not as hectic as it is in their countries, meaning they will not be as stressed... 3- Working hours are less in the third world country especially if you are a missionary. 4- They live from other people's economic support (given through churches or organizations) by soliciting for their cause with tax deductible donations (everybody wins). 5- Chance to travel back and forth whenever they want. 6- Obtain administrative positions without qualifications required in a similar job back in their countries.

Changing the paradigm: Create a positive impact.

Resist the urge to reinvent the wheel... don't create new organizations, instead research local organizations that work well. Learn how they accomplish their mission. Compile and analyze to maximize your organizational goals. Many embassy officers in third world countries actually prefer that tourists indiscriminately donate money but financially support legal local organizations already established.

Use human resources wisely: why fund full time missionaries when there is an abundant source of unemployed professionals? This directly promotes the vision of many churches and organizations: enhance the quality of life. If the goal is to spread a belief or

religion, find someone with the same heart and train that person. Nevertheless, don't forget what your goal is. Each individual has his or her own skills.

Basic 101 about: how to use the economic resources wisely. Why is it better to economically support a foreigner in a third world country?... Maximize resources: raise money for school supplies or the monthly salary of an unemployed teacher or any other unemployed professional in the third world country.

A community is divided in different areas; each area is represented by one specific leader: education - the principal of the local school, health - health clinic director, church - spiritual leaders and community - community leaders. Therefore it's a must to meet every single key person, analyze requests, diagnose the problems that can be addressed with a mutual effort and execute programs or projects to make a positive change... based on people's needs, not what outsiders think the needs are. Some common problems confronting youth in poor communities are STDs, teen pregnancies, domestic violence and other social issues. Created to help Nicaraguans, Empower Nica (<http://www.empowernica.org/>) has made amazing progress. Although based in Atlanta, Georgia, this organization has increased opportunities for work; employing teenagers to teach and mentor other peers. Topics discussed include the consequences of sex before marriage, goal setting, respect and self-esteem. The outstanding success of this organization is based on very little North American intervention in the country; the program is run by locals (with North Americans financial support). The founders and supporters visit at least twice a year offering supervision.

Nevertheless, along with any foreign funded community projects, donors should visit and work alongside the locals to see how they have benefited from a job. While here you can share and build relationships. Missionaries must visit the places where they are investing so to experience what is being done. Also, by doing this you will help that country's economy.

Eliminate the Superman complex: be humble. Become immersed in the culture, learn and understand the reality of the country. Even though a person can master a language, without local assistance, there is a decreased chance to effectively communicate. Hire interpreters so locals are employed. Don't just feed the poor but employ them, empower them to thrive. People are not "poor" just "limited" in reaching a better world. Some professionals can't occupy a position because there is a "Volunteer" in that position. Stop believing people can't move forward without full time missionary intervention. Some organizations have worked for years in communities of third world countries. Thousands of dollars have been spent and still people are poor and have needs. To change the paradigm about "missions", "help" and "community development", missions must learn about the country, the culture and the real necessity that needs to be addressed. Moreover, to bring awareness to one another about the possible negative effects. ONCE AGAIN, EMPLOY LOCALS SO THEY CAN THRIVE.

Conclusion

There are many missions soliciting for assistance. To evaluate the impact the following questions must be asked:

- 1- *What have locals done without mission intervention?*
- 2- *Is the mission helping the local economy?*
- 3- *Are locals being employed to empower their own people?*
- 4- *Is the mission creating dependency?*

As previously mentioned, missions have brought much positive spiritual growth, hope and love to many who may not otherwise have received assistance. Many have received benefits. However, it's time to change the way missions are delivered so there can be a greater impact to the third world countries.

There are many groups appealing to churches and people to get involved. In order to make a greater impact the following aspects must be evaluated: Is the work to satisfy yourself or for people to thrive? If you are a church or an organization active member, are you supporting a foreigner or employing a third world professional citizen? Are you utilizing the best resources to work? Are you immersing in the culture to understand and embrace it? Does your organization have its own facilities or support local businesses? There are spiritual leaders and qualified human resources in these countries that love their people and want to help. They are waiting for an opportunity to thrive, flourish and prosper.

It's time to change the way missions are delivered so there can be a greater impact to the third world countries.