

Problems in the Indigenous Church

By William MacDonald

Most of us gladly give endorsement to indigenous church principles. We say that we believe that local churches should be self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. In perhaps a hazy sort of way we assume that the assemblies on the mission field are under the oversight of national elders, that they are financed by the offerings of national believers and that these national believers are aggressively reaching out with the Gospel and seeing new assemblies planted. There are cases where the facts do not measure up to your expectations. Some of the assemblies on the mission field are little more than outposts of our American assemblies, under American leadership, and financed by American capital. In these cases the missionary is the resident pastor and the great white father. Missionary colonialism is not yet dead.

But what we do not seem to realize is that we in the United States can and do contribute to the breakdown of indigenous principles on the mission field. It is humbling but true that we are part of the problem rather than of the solution. And much of the difficulty stems from two characteristics of American believers – generosity and gullibility. By shelling out the money in response to emotional appeals, we often work against ourselves and the best interests of the work of God.

Let us look at some of the situations where we are culprits in hindering missionary work from becoming truly indigenous.

Sponsoring of Students from Underdeveloped Countries

Young people from many of the poorer countries of the world have an enormous desire to come to this country for education just to leave their own country for the land flowing with milk and honey! Their initial contact is often made with Americans on religious tours, or by mail. By deft diplomacy they obtain funds for the trip and sponsorship in the United States.

Once they are here, it is understandable if they become intoxicated with the materialism of our affluent society. Their spiritual vitality takes a nose-dive. They lose any desire to go back to serve the Lord in their own country. Of course, sometimes they are forced to return by immigration laws. Often they go back with a reluctant heart, and with little zeal for Christian service among their own people. They have lost the common touch anyway; culturally and economically they are now upper-class. And they impatiently wait a call to take the Gospel back to America.

While all this is going on, we are holding high-powered missionary rallies in the United States, urging our own young people to give their lives to Christ on the foreign field. We tell them to do our work and learn the language and identify with the people. They probably never will learn to speak the language without a foreign accent, and they can never identify with the people 100%.

Son, on the one hand we bring young nationals to this country – those who already have the language and who are fully identified with the people – and we effectively ruin them for the work of God in their homeland. Then we send out our own young people to take their place- which they can never do completely.

What is the answer? Does this mean that the church should callously refuse the pleas of young believers to come to this country for Bible training, etc.? The first ideal is for them to get whatever training is available in their own country. Or, if there is none, they should be encouraged to enrol in schools in neighbouring countries where the economic and cultural levels are approximately the same. Only as a last resort should they be helped to come to the United States, and then only with the solemn promise that they will return to serve the Lord in

their own country (and I say this with tongue in cheek because none of these promises is foolproof).

Financing National Evangelists in Foreign Countries

Some evangelical organizations appeal to Christians in this country to send in funds in order to salary workers in the third world. The argument is that it is no longer necessary for us to cross an ocean, learn a foreign language, and adapt to a different culture. We can be missionaries at home by financing national evangelists abroad. These workers already speak the language and fully identify with their own people. As a compelling touch, we are assured that we are thus helping to make the work truly indigenous. It all sounds very convincing.

I do not question the sincerity of these organizations or the integrity of the people connected with them. But I certainly question the use of the word “indigenous” to describe their program. And I question whether this is the proper way to build self-supporting and self-propagating New Testament Churches.

Encouraging Foreign Workers to Tour the Assemblies

An abuse that has helped to wreck indigenous assemblies overseas is the American practice of featuring workers from third-world countries to “tell of their work.” These speakers are received without any prior investigation. Some may not even be in fellowship in assemblies, and others may not have the confidence of assembly leaders in their own country. But by emotional human-interest stories, they touch the hearts of the saints and this in turn activates the nerve that connects the heartstring and the wallet. The money flows, and often for unworthy causes.

It has happened that, after accumulating a sizable sum of money, even good men return to their field of labour with tragic results! First of all, they are now millionaires, comparatively speaking – no longer on the same economic level as the people or of the other workers. This opens a Pandora’s box of jealousy and resentment, bickering and strife ensue. And their own ministry suffers: the local people comment sadly that the trip to the U.S. has caused a loss of spiritual power.

Commending Foreign Nationals to Their Own Country

Somewhat related to the preceding folly is the practice of U.S. assemblies commending foreign workers to the work of the Lord in their own land. Here is how it works. A national believer from an overseas assembly somehow makes his way to the U.S. for training, for employment, or for preaching and teaching. He associates himself with a local assembly for whatever the prescribed time is, then asks for commendation to return to his own country. He goes back with the virtual guarantee of financial support, American-style, which means that he is a plutocrat in his own country. He may also take back a late-model car, which is a cruel anomaly in lands of grinding poverty. It is not impossible that he will take back a raft of modern appliances as well.

It may be hard for us in America to realize what this does to the work of the Lord. First of all, it gives a totally wrong view of Christ and of Christianity that any Christian worker can luxuriate like this while his fellows are dying of starvation. Second, it labels the man as a pawn of the imperial West, and this is an especially sensitive matter in lands of rising nationals and totalitarian governments. This man would be one of the first targets of a firing squad in the event of a takeover.

It is utterly contrary to indigenous church principles for U.S. assemblies to commend foreign nationals to the work on their own lands. They should be commended by their own assemblies and believers. This will mean that their standard of living will be approximately commensurate with that of wage-earners in their own country.

Conclusion

It might appear from what has been said that we grudge financial help to national believers in other countries. That is not true. It is just that by the unwise use of the American dollar we can do more harm than good.

We do have a responsibility to help the work of God overseas. But there is a right way to do it. I suggest that this should be channelled through respected missionaries on the field who know the need who know the prevailing economic level, and who are determined to keep the assemblies indigenous.

The missionary should veil the source of the money as much as possible. Instead of handing it directly to national evangelists, for instance, and thus becoming their patron, he should funnel it anonymously through the local assembly. It would then be distributed by responsible elders or deacons, and the workers would acknowledge it to the church not to the missionary.

The missionary would, of course, use discretion in limiting expenditures to what is locally expectable and not to what is obviously American. For instance, he would not provide \$200.00 for a national evangelist when the governor of the province gets \$60.00. And he would not help finance an American-style chapel in a land where the people are accustomed to mud-bricks and thatched roofs.

Another way in which we can be of tremendous help to national evangelists is by providing them with Bibles and outstanding Christian literature in the language of the people.

The Americanization of Christian work in foreign lands has been in many cases a serious drawback. In some lands where we have failed to build on indigenous principles, the terrorists have swept in and taken bitter revenge on everything that smacked of U.S. Imperialism. When will we ever learn?