

Chipping In

A Sri Lankan leader gives challenges and cautions to North American givers.

A conversation with Ajith Fernando.

As a prominent evangelical leader from Sri Lanka, Ajith Fernando has something to say about Western patterns of giving. He has served as the National Director of Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka since 1976. His most recent book is *Sharing the Truth in Love: How to Relate to People of Other Faiths* (Discovery House 2001). He is also featured in the July 2001 edition of *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* on partnership. He was gracious to answer a few questions on strategic giving for *Mission Frontiers* via e-mail.

MF: What would be some key elements that you would include in a criteria for strategic giving?

Fernando: Let me first say that I am a little cautious about this word “strategic.” Indeed, we must think strategically. For example, if a field suddenly opens to the Gospel for a brief window of time, then we must concentrate our energies on this field. In this sense,

strategy is important and should be considered when we make decisions about giving.

The way we normally use the word “strategic” may imply a desire for quick results. If that were always the case, some of the most significant work that is happening in the Kingdom would be eliminated. Christians should be ministering in the places of greatest need. But, often, that work is not very attractive, and the results may take a long time to come. Some Christians might feel that, given the lack of visible fruit, such ministries are not worth investing in financially. Some of the great heroes of the Church today would not be very attractive to many North Americans, as their work does not excite “strategically”-oriented people. And some of these heroes I am talking about are American missionaries!

Therefore, more stress should be placed on *call* than on the strategic nature of the giving. We must always ask, “What work is God calling us to be involved in?” To discover this, we must become informed about what the needs are around the world. We cannot meet all the needs we encounter, so we must prayerfully seek God’s direction and come to the sense that “this is where God wants us to be involved.” This is how the Antioch church sent out Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:2-3), and this is what lies behind Paul’s launch into Europe through the Macedonian call (Acts 16:6-10).

Of course there are times when an *emergency situation* needs an emergency response. This happened with the Antioch church when Agabus prophesied that there was going to be a famine, and Judea would be in need (Acts 11: 28-30). Christians have a good record of being among the first to come with assistance in disaster situations.

Another important criterion is that of *relationship*. Most Third World cultures are relational in orientation, and relationships take time to cultivate. Many Western mission groups are signing partnership contracts with Third World groups. Perhaps this is a positive step to help avoid the abuse of missionary gifts, but contracts should never be a substitute for the hard work of building relationships. Giving is just one aspect of a spiritual tie between Christians. That tie involves many



Ajith Fernando speaking to the delegates at Amsterdam 2000.

things such as sharing heart concerns, praying for one another and, of course, reporting on the work and the use of donations.

MF: What particular challenge would you give to a North American?

Fernando: The age-old challenge of the glaring disparity in resources between North America and the rest of the world is still relevant and vitally important to stress. Paul said that one reason for giving is to achieve equality (2 Cor. 8:13-14). That is one of the most troubling statements in the Bible for me! It should make anyone who lives in relative affluence extremely uneasy. That unease is bearable if we have the more basic joy of the Lord as our strength. We should allow our hearts to be broken by the spiritual and physical needs of people. It will encourage us to be sober-minded and make missionary involvement a vital, primary aspect of our lifestyle.

I realize that the North Americans are motivating a lot of people today by challenging them to experience the thrill of a mission trip. These trips have influenced people to rethink their priorities and become lifelong “World Christians.” This is great.

An even more important way to motivate people to be involved is to expose them to the stark reality of the difference Christ makes in the lives of people. Without Christ people are eternally lost, and with Him they have eternal salvation.

The Great Commission deals with such an absolutely urgent issue that we should be willing to die for it! Giving is just a small part of that dying!

In this post-modern world experiential motivation to mission might be more appealing than theological motivation, but we need a strong foundation to endure the suffering that will surely come to us if we do something significant for God. Christians need to learn to stick to their commitments when the going gets tough. That is how we will bring the message of salvation to a world that is hostile to the Gospel. The theological fact of the eternal lostness of people without Christ is one such foundation that will give us the perseverance that our commitment to the call requires.

MF: What particular caution would you give to a North American?

Fernando: I think North Americans are among the most generous people in the world. As a student in the United States, I experienced the full measure of this generosity. But I also think that North Americans have a difficult time thinking cross-culturally. Despite all the talk about cross-cultural relationships today, they process information they receive from other cultures through their own

cultural grid and end up making some very wrong judgments.

Perhaps this is because Americans have not been forced to face up to revolt from colonies like the Europeans had to. They are such a huge economic bloc that they haven’t needed to adjust much to the rest of the world, though the rest of the world has had to adjust to them in order to survive!

Perhaps another cause is the efficiency orientation of the West. Westerners often take words at face value, come to conclusions and get down to action rapidly without going through the process of relationship building. The result is that they often end up supporting people who are not very honest. Given the widespread lack of integrity in the world today, you find many such people in the church too! I am amazed sometimes how Westerners can be so impressed by people about whom many Third World Christians have so many questions!

Let me suggest some ways to overcome this cultural blind spot. First, Westerners should be aware that they have this problem and therefore be suspicious about their

All Christians are rich, and have something to offer to the world, even though they may be economically extremely poor. Our challenge is to convince our people of this!

initial conclusions about people and projects. Then they can ask trustworthy people from within the culture for help. Of course, our people are very reluctant to be critical about a fellow countryman and may just give a small hint about their reservations. The Westerners, who are already enthusiastic about this person, often do not catch the hint. They latch on to the positive things that were said (usually out of cultural politeness). They go ahead and back the person and often end up being taken for a ride.

Therefore, it is vital to take time to cultivate deep friendship and spiritual accountability with individuals you desire to help. One of the keys to overcoming the lack of integrity in our cultures is Christian community that truly practices spiritual accountability. I have seen dishonest people change in these environments. Those who do not want to change usually leave because they find the demand for openness too difficult to handle.

Let me give just one more caution. In our cultures, it is very difficult to say “No” to a donor’s request. If a donor says that he or she is coming to visit the receiver, the receiver would usually immediately write back saying, “Come,” even though such a visit would be extremely inconvenient. This has become a serious

problem in recent times. We have a shortage of leaders in our part of the world, and the few leaders we do have are unable to do the work they need to because they are so busy hosting foreigners. Friends have shared with me their great frustration over this, but they would never mention it to a visiting donor. To tell a guest such a thing is quite unacceptable for our way of hospitality. Westerners need to be conscious of this and be on the lookout for any hint that it would be unwise to visit at a given time.

MF: How would you challenge a Sri Lankan (or someone from another developing country) differently than you would a North American?

Fernando: We have to convince Sri Lankan Christians

that they do have something to contribute to missions. Our problems may seem to be so great that it is hard to communicate this. So many of our leaders have gone to the West that many of our people feel we have given the West enough “foreign aid” by giving away our greatest treasures—our key leaders. The reasoning is that since so many of our people are using their brilliance to enrich these already rich cultures, we must use all of our remaining resources to look after ourselves.

But all Christians, wherever they live, must be missionary-minded. Henry Martyn said, “The spirit of Christ is the spirit of missions; and the nearer we get to him, the more intensely missionary we must be become.” This attitude is something we must inculcate in all Christians whether they are from economically rich

Facing the Facts

A mission executive addresses the sometimes distorted financial picture of missions.

—George Verwer

Operation Mobilization has people from about 80 different countries working in dozens of other countries around the world. But, we do not take people from new, emerging, sending countries unless they can arrange their own support—most of it from their own country, and a good part of it from their own church. In the long term, we feel that this is the right way forward. The future does not lie in larger and larger sums being channeled from the West to support the work in so-called receiving countries.

I appreciate those who are carefully trying to help nationals in their own country to get the job done by supplying them with books, tools, and sometimes finances. However, dependency and paternalism easily come in when we give large sums of

money to people to work in their own country. I’m not saying it can’t be done, but I am saying that we should count the cost, face the reality of what we are trying to do, and avoid making negative generalizations about different approaches. Supporting national evangelists and missionaries can actually help the local church by lifting some of the burden, but it does have a possible downside: the church fails to send.

The most strident argument in this debate is the one that says that the cost of missionaries from the West is just too great when put against the amount needed to support a national worker in the same situation. The whole question of money and the comparisons made between the “inexpensive” national and the “expensive” missionary can get greatly distorted.

Many are unwilling to draw attention to the fact that although nationals often live very inexpensively as single people, when they get families, the price often seems to go up tremendously, especially if they are interested in sending their

children abroad to be educated. I am not criticizing them for this, but it does make a mockery of the statement that national workers are cheaper. Some of the least expensive people to support on the mission field are Westerners on short-term programs. On the OM and YWAM ships, Christian workers can probably live more cheaply than anywhere in the world; of course, they only get a few cubic meters of living space, and for this reason not many families are accepted.

Churches that complain about the high cost of missionaries need to ask themselves searching questions about how they spend their money. It seems silly to me that a church that has several millionaires and a building program worth seven or eight million dollars could complain that they need to raise \$48,000 for a family to work overseas.

The cost of supporting a missionary, of course, varies greatly from one part of the world to another. This further complexity, that supporting a missionary in France is different from supporting one in India, for example, is often not taken into consideration. This adds to the irresponsibility of those who circulate figures like \$40 per month to support a local worker. It simply is not true. Things are much more complex than this. It may be that \$40 from here, \$40 from there, and a little job on the side could provide enough. However, this can

George Verwer is founder and international coordinator of Operation Mobilization. This piece is taken from his recent book, Out of the Comfort Zone: A Compelling Vision for Transforming Global Missions, Bloomington, Minnesota: Bethany House, 2000. Used with permission.

or poor backgrounds. All Christians are rich, and have something to offer to the world, even though they may be economically extremely poor. Our challenge is to convince our people of this!

MF: Do you see a pattern in America of believers being willing to give of their resources but less willing to give of themselves?

Fernando: This is a pattern we see everywhere, and it cannot be helped sometimes. Given the great needs in the world, we cannot get personally involved in every project we give to, or we would burn out very soon! But we must get involved personally when it comes to our primary missionary concerns. Our ministry has benefited

from the giving of some North Americans who are doing this, and they have been a great blessing to me personally.

I think that the best way to get personally involved is to pray. What a wonderfully exciting privilege prayer is! We can affect the course of history thousands of miles away from home by praying for missions right where we are. I think prayer is more powerful than money. Therefore, we must make motivation to missionary praying a higher priority than it currently is.

Of course, when you pray with your spiritual ears open, God starts prompting you about other ways to get involved in missions. Prayer is dangerous business! But I would much rather choose the dangerous excitement of being open to God's wonderful surprises over the deadening boredom of living for self! 🌐

put people with such meager support under so much financial pressure that sometimes they end up being dishonest and unable to handle money in the work of God.

I am convinced that in certain countries some people are gathering up workers—who have no call from God—by paying them a small salary to do Christian work. They simply need a job; there is massive unemployment, and so they line up to get involved. If you have the money, you can sign them up. They often don't have enough training, and their lives often go out of control. After they get married and have children, there is no longer enough money to support them, and resentment, hurt, and confusion result. These are things that we cannot afford in this great task of world evangelism.

It is essential to accept the fact that a large investment is needed for the effective preparation of missionaries. We also need to understand that if we think supporting nationals is some kind of miracle shortcut toward getting the job done, we may be making a serious mistake. There is no simple, cheap, discount shortcut to world missions, although there are ways in which we can economize and be more diligent. At home or overseas, a more complete picture is needed to deliver us on every side from small-

mindedness, whether it's missionary small-mindedness or national church small-mindedness. When most of the money comes from abroad, it often leaves the person's local church out of the picture. We cannot afford the disunity between those who feel they want to put their money into supporting nationals and those who want to be involved in sending missionaries from their own church or country. Not everything can be judged on the basis of money.

The Great Commission calls us to not only send [money] but [also] ourselves. Just as the Father sent the Son to become man and dwell among us, Jesus sends us into the world to personally identify with those whom we would reach. This will not always be the most economical solution, but it will be the greatest demonstration of love: We cared enough to surrender our comfort and way of life to share God's love with others.¹

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It is a time for repentance and brokenness, a growth of grace and a turning away from subjective to objective and biblical ways of thinking about how we can get on with responding to the challenge of Acts 1:8. Whether our emphasis is on the sending of resources for the use of national churches overseas or on the preparation and sending of missionaries, we can work together for the fulfillment of the Great Commission that burns to this day in the heart of our Lord Jesus Christ. 🌐

1. Craig Ott, "Let the Buyer Beware," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (July 1993), Box 794, Wheaton, IL 60189. Used with permission.

