

# GIVING WITH DISCERNMENT

RALPH HANGER

/ Ralph Hanger was born in Bolivia, educated in UK and has spent most of his working life in East Africa. For 15 years he and his wife, Jane, served with Scripture Union in Malawi. Together they have spent 12 more years working with the African Pastors Fellowship in East Africa working in DR Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and Malawi. Ralph is currently a research Associate with the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, looking at the problems associated with unhealthy dependency between churches in Africa and those in the Materially Developed World.

“I have so much more than you have. Let me share some of my plenty with you.” How much aid, given from Christians and churches in the Materially Developed World (MDW) to the less well off in the Majority World starts from motivation similar to this. As followers of the One who included a generous lifestyle and care for the poor and needy as part of his manifesto, (Matthew 5:37-39 for instance), this is surely right.

What a nasty shock it can be to find out that the money we have sought to give from our plenty has actually caused harm instead of the good we had intended. This need not be the result of corruption or mismanagement. The money has gotten through to the person for whom it was intended, but instead of helping them it has caused real harm.

The following is just one example of what unfortunately can and does happen: through a mission trip, a holiday safari or maybe a business trip, a Christian or church from the MDW links up with a rural pastor in Africa. Seeing the poverty of the pastor and how his congregation

is unable to pay him adequately, a perfectly natural response is to want to pay his salary, which would be “small change” for many individual Christians in the MDW, let alone for a church congregation. Surely this will free him from worrying over food, clothes, shelter and education for his family and help him concentrate on his ministry for the Lord. This all sounds very plausible and worthwhile from our vantage point in the MDW, and sometimes it works out like that in the beginning.

Unfortunately, a number of other factors may kick in which in due course negatively affect the one we are seeking to help, as well as his ministry and church.

One of the first realities that occurs between the pastor and the local Christian community is jealousy. “Why should one pastor get a regular good salary, irrespective of the success of his ministry and not others who have the same problems of providing for their families alongside their congregations?” This can lead to many negative effects in the overall community leading to isolation of the pastor and his family and even worse.

Then consider the relationship between this pastor and his own congregation. Until the time of his sponsorship the pastor has been part of the community, relying on the same weather conditions and market concerns for his livelihood as everyone else, both through his family’s farming and through the church’s offerings.

Now, suddenly the pastor is getting funds from overseas and is no longer responsible to the congregation or to local conditions for his well-being. He no longer shares the realities, joys and sufferings of those he is serving. His ministry can be adversely affected as, in the important area of resources, he is no longer one of the community.

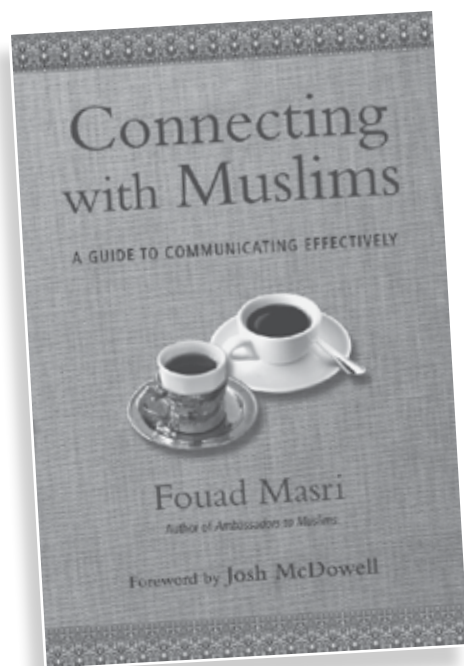
However, much he teaches folk to trust in God for their needs, they see his source of resources as very different. His relationship with his congregation as well as with his actual ministry has been severely strained by those who only wanted to help. Maybe the pastor will spend more effort in maintaining his relationship with his sponsors than with his congregation, after all they pay him.

Put as an extreme—he is now seen as a puppet of foreigners and may well attract folk to “His church,” not for the spiritual benefits which they may gain, but to share in his outside source of wealth.

It need not be that way. If potential sponsors will look into local conditions more carefully to find ways to help the community prosper in such a way that offerings in the congregation will increase to a level where the pastor can be supported at the level of the average community member, or perhaps help the pastor’s wife with an income-generating project, many of the problems can be overcome.

It is harder work to find schemes which will benefit a whole community and not just a single pastor, but in the long run the effect is likely to be positive and not harmful. We must give to help, but be discerning in the way we do it. MF

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*“Relying on biblical principles, [Masri] shows us how to engage in and maintain fruitful conversations that lift up Christ without causing offense or compromising the gospel.”*

— WINFRIED CORDUAN, author of *Neighboring Faiths*