

SUSTAINABLE MISSION

WHO PAYS FOR THE BOOKS?

SUSTAINABLE MISSION IS A macro-movement, a way of thinking, a general framework. It encourages missionaries and mission supporters to think carefully about how they are serving in local communities, and to consider methods and models of mission that encourage local sustainability and the empowerment of local believers, rather than developing an unhealthy model of patronage and dependency.

In many ways it is easy to agree with the principles of sustainable mission, but when it comes to the crunch, decisions about day-to-day practical matters needs to be made. This is a story of one such decision.

I've been a missionary in Mexico for eight years. I work as part of a para-church movement, providing theological training to pastors and church leaders. But I am also a member of my local church. The youth group at our church has decided to start using the Spanish-language version of a well-known evangelism tool. The program runs for 14 weeks and includes a short booklet of Bible studies, homework material and other readings. Each participant in the program requires a booklet which costs about \$4 US. This is not a huge cost for the youth of our church as they are largely from middle or upper-middle class families, but there is a culture of receiving things for free.

So the question that has been raised is, "Who is going to pay for the books?"

The easy answer is that I (as the foreign missionary) will, or at least I will contact an American church who will gladly give the \$200 needed to buy the books. A couple of emails, a phone call or two and I would have the money – no problem.

Sounds good. Good resources get into the hands of people who can use them – surely that is our aim? It is a model I've seen repeated many times across Latin America. But thinking through some of the principles of sustainable mission allows a few problems to be identified and an alternative model to be developed.

First, if the group receives the material for free, the users lack a "personal investment," which usually means less motivation to use it. A free resource is more likely to sit on the shelf rather than be used. Instead, if they pay for the material themselves, they are more likely to turn up to the sessions, do the prescribed homework, and therefore receive the benefit.

Second, freely given materials trains the recipients to wait for the next free box (which may come in a month, a year or never). Instead, if they buy the materials themselves, they are in the habit of buying good materials for training, evangelism or edification, and will seek them out.

Third, bringing in free materials from outside undermines local Christian booksellers, authors and publishers here in Mexico who are trying to develop good resources in Spanish. Instead, locals buying local means relationships are developed (see the second point above), businesses are grown and local authors are encouraged to produce locally relevant materials.

So what does the theory of sustainable mission mean for the very practical question of "Who pays for the books?"

It means the local participants do. In fact, even better, the local participants can pay 120% of the cost of the books, to cover the costs of the extra books needed for their non-Christian friends, and to pay for the coffee and cookies that will be offered as part of the training. Then, when the next course runs, they will be in the habit of using their local resources, rather than looking outside.

Finally, this model empowers the local believers to serve each other and their community. It encourages them to see a need and meet that need themselves as members of the body of Christ who have been blessed with gifts and resources to do the good works that God has prepared in advance for them.



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