



What Have You Brought For Us?

Reflections on Unhealthy Dependency via My Short-Term Missions (STM) Experiences

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The Dominican Republic

The cattle truck turned off the highway onto a dirt road that wound through acres and acres of sugarcane. Two more cattle trucks followed, each one loaded with one to two dozen eager Americans. I was one of them. We were headed to yet another remote Dominican village. After getting our bearings, we began our visit in the village by following the same routine of all the other mission trips I had taken. We broke off into teams and set out to meet needs, pray, and share the gospel with precious people who needed Jesus.

Each and every day, we were welcomed with the joyful screams of children and the welcoming glances of the crowds who were gathered outside the clinics. But something happened one particular day that got my attention. Children began to shout, practically in unison, “Where are the *dulces*?” “*Dulces*” means *goodies* or *sweets* in Spanish. A girl who looked about six years old pulled on my arm and asked in Spanish, “What have you brought for us?” I whole-heartedly responded, “I brought with me the love of Jesus.” Upon hearing this, the girl instantly dropped my hand and ran towards another American group who indeed were passing out *dulces*.

Something really bothered me about that seemingly insignificant interaction with the kids. But I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. Truth be told, I sat uncomfortably with this memory for several years before it started to make sense.

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My Lesson Learned: The Gospel of Goods Waters Down the Gospel of Jesus Christ

Eventually, I was able to make sense of what I experienced back in the Dominican Republic. Group after group of foreign Christian visitors had come to the Dominican Republic using an evangelism method that included telling the gospel, giving handouts and meeting needs. The Dominican people had become so accustomed to this method that their favorable responses had very little to do with Jesus and a whole lot to do with what the “Jesus-people” brought.

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The kids who were seeking *dulces* from the foreign Christians who showed up on the cattle trucks are representative of a larger destructive pattern that sends the message that the *good news* of the gospel is not *good enough*. We unwittingly use a bait-and-switch style of evangelism: *Here are some candy and free medicine ... Oh and by the way, we will share the gospel with you tucked in there somewhere.* The recipients of this, in turn, use their own style of bait-and-switch: *We will put up with your gospel proselytization as long as you give us something first.* It is a sickly pattern that we unintentionally perpetuate, but perpetuate nonetheless. The words of someone on the receiving end of missions may bring clarity:

One day Bolacha explained to me [Chris Little] that there are two kinds of gospels in this world. The first one, the gospel of Christ, provides for forgiveness of sin, eternal life, and sets people free from the power of the devil. This gospel involves suffering since Christ commanded us to take up our cross and follow Him (Matt. 16:24). The second gospel, the gospel of goods (“*o evangelho dos bens*” in Portuguese), is the counterfeit gospel, which offers material wealth alongside the true gospel, enticing people to become Christians. In his opinion, the fundamental problem with the gospel of goods is that when the goods run out the people run away. He said he had seen denomination after denomination import shipping containers of food, clothes, etc., during times of drought and famine, attracting thousands of people. But when the shipping containers stopped coming the people were nowhere to be found.¹

It never crossed my mind before that what seems to be compassion may actually water down the gospel and the process of making disciples. How do we begin to make disciples if we don't even know what people are actually responding to when we interact with them? How can our

hosts choose to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior based on His merit—what He said and did on behalf of the world—when all they see is the *dulces*?

Compassion in and of itself is not the problem. The problem lies in the repetitive truckloads of foreigners, month after month, who offer fringe benefits—often labeled as development and compassion ministry—along with the gospel. We have conditioned a whole country into passionately seeking the *dulces*, while half-heartedly seeking Jesus. We can defend the holistic gospel—the integral blend of word and deed—all day long, but this won't take away the struggle that Bolacha and others face due to our strong tendency to create unhealthy dependency on our goods as we spread the Good News. This gospel of goods that Bolacha refers to is the opposite of Jesus' go-to approach in Luke 9:3–6 (NIV):

He told them: “Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt. Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town. If people do not welcome you, leave their town and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.” So they set out and went from village to village, proclaiming the good news and healing people everywhere.

The mutual give-and-take of the relationships between the disciples and their hosts is embedded within Jesus' instructions. The disciples gave up their goods and position of power, while offering the good news and healing of the sick through Jesus' authority. The people within the villages offered shelter, food, fellowship, and peace. Reflecting on the girl who quickly disengaged with me and my message of Jesus' love because I didn't have any candy to give her causes me to resonate with Jean Johnson's comment in a *Mission Frontiers* article, “I would rather have potential Persons of Peace reveal the true intentions of their heart or spiritual condition than have them half-heartedly join in a movement effort for Jesus Christ because of mixed motives.”²

Papua New Guinea

When I went to Papua New Guinea, I decided to go strictly as a learner. This included gleaning from the experiences of others in that area. During my time there, an American missionary shared with me a revealing

¹ Quoted in Jean Johnson, *We Are Not The Hero: A Missionary's Guide for Sharing Christ, Not a Culture of Dependency* (Sisters OR: Deep River Books, 2012), 118.

² Jean Johnson, “Using Foreign Money to Start, Sustain, and Speed Up Movements,” *Mission Frontiers*. (November 2020).

account. He had spent over a decade in a particular village. His main role was to mobilize and lead a team of local people to translate the New Testament into their own heart language. The local people joyfully agreed to this Scripture translation project.

As time progressed, the missionary deeply desired that the local people oversee the translation project based on their own determination, skills and resources. But, he encountered great resistance with this transfer of ownership. When the reality that the project would no longer be free nor serve as a gateway for further development, their interest in the translation project quickly faded. I could sense the heartache in the missionary's voice as he shared this account, but I could also see that he had learned some valuable lessons, which he had humbly passed on for the benefit of others such as myself.



At the end of the day, the local people did not desire the New Testament in their own language as much as they desired the benefits of the project.

My Lesson Learned: Ownership and Reproducibility Need to Be Built-in from the Beginning

There are three key reasons why local people did not have the desire to continue with the New Testament translation project.

First, the people's enthusiastic acceptance of the project was based on their hope for the personal benefits. Precedent

and prior missionary activity had led the local people to anticipate the fringe benefits that typically come with mission-driven projects such as trucks, resources, salaries and amenities. At the end of the day, the local people did not desire the New Testament in their own language as much as they desired the benefits of the project.

Second, ownership is not easily transferable, and therefore must be present from the beginning. When I was 10 years old, my parents had a vision for me to have perfectly straight teeth. What followed was three years of appointments and fees. As a child, this vision was never mine, it was theirs. Do you know what resulted? After it was all said, done, and paid for, I stopped wearing my retainers, and my teeth started to move out of alignment. In the same way, local people must perceive themselves as owning and stewarding their own vision, from the beginning, or everything will go awry. Without such ownership from the start, the local self-perception might look something like this: *I am a recipient—an employee—and therefore, I will temporarily plug myself into another's vision; this project does not live or die based on me, but based on the effort of the mission worker.*

Third, the pattern and precedent of depending on outsiders was already deeply embedded in the local people's psyches. Even if it was their passion to have the New Testament in their heart language, they could not take on the components that were not readily sustainable and reproducible for them. If our mission models come with costly price tags and require great cultural leaps and bounds to conform to an outsider culture, local people will not be able to reproduce these models without outside support. The tragic result is that we unwittingly erect higher barriers for local disciple-makers by setting unfeasible standards and making locally sustainable alternatives feel inferior. This same truth about reproducibility applies to short-term missions, partnerships and resident missions, no matter how sincere and heartfelt we are about a project or initiative.

I am so grateful that this missionary was willing to share what he learned with me. His story reveals the importance of local ownership and reproducibility, and the fact that both elements need to be built-in from the very beginning, rather than transferred from the outsider to the insider at some later date.

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Uganda

While I was in Uganda with my husband, visiting some relatives, we tagged along with a STM team made up of Americans who visited a Ugandan refugee settlement. We observed them as they put on a program for the children. Sam, a Ugandan man, accompanied them to serve as their interpreter. The team sang songs in English using hand motions and then shared a short lesson. Beyond serving as an interpreter, Sam played an instrumental role in rallying the kids and keeping their attention with his charismatic personality and energy. When the day was over, the STM team leader summarized their experience in the following way:

If we were a band, Sam would be the singer, the guitar player, the bass guitar player and the drummer. Oh, and us? We would just be in the background swaying and trying our best not to get in Sam's way.

Wow! What a perfect image and honest reflection of what really happened in regard to the kids' program at the refugee settlement that day. If someone would have asked Sam to share about his experience, I wonder what he might have said!



My Lesson Learned: We Reinforce a Pattern of "Hiding Strengths"

Sam could have done everything without the team—as a matter of fact, any Christian Ugandan team could have ministered effectively in that setting. Sadly, Sam, who knew the culture and language inside and out, was relegated to the role of interpreter in the shadows of the foreign visitors as they served in the spotlight.

How does this feed unhealthy dependency? As outsiders, entering places that we tend to label as the developing world, we often take on the mindset and role of heroes. We inwardly think that *we, the ones who "have it all together," are here to assist those who "do not."* I can say this with ease because this was my original assumption and behavior. Upon arriving in countries I had never been to before, I revealed all my strengths—my access to finances, my many connections, my higher education, my acquired knowledge and my well-rounded theology. Subsequently, I did my best to hide my weaknesses from my hosts—my culture shock, my selfishness, my desire for human praise, my anxiety, my broken relationships on the team, my lack of making disciples back home and so much more.

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Meanwhile, the beneficiaries of my mission outreaches did the exact opposite. They presented their weaknesses—their lack of financial resources, education, ministry tools, equipment and so forth. At the same time, they hid their strengths such as musical capacity, ingenuity to fix and make things, the knack for working within the culture, deep and practical spirituality, faith that moves mountains, stamina under persecution and so much more.

Presenting our strengths as helpers from the outside, while causing the insider beneficiaries (who are the insiders) to hide their strengths, is both the cause and the condition of unhealthy dependency. In the end it is not helpful to either side.

My Guiding Principles

I still have much to learn about the causes and consequences of unhealthy dependency. One thing I do is try to take what I have already learned and create my own guiding principles. Based on what I wrote in this article, these are three of my guiding principles for cross-cultural mission engagement:

1. I will strive to invite people to seek and follow Jesus based on His own merit, believing the Good News is good; therefore, I will “pack light” when it comes to any Great Commission efforts locally and globally.
2. I will encourage and use reproducible forms and patterns of love, mercy, compassion and discipleship, so those who I influence will be capable of reproducing the same.
3. I will do my best to unearth the immensely beautiful God-given capacity and strength of the people I serve.

As I gain more understanding and more experience, I trust my list of guiding principles will be refined and increased. Will you join me in creating your own list of guiding principles of how to avoid creating unhealthy dependency in your local and global mission endeavors? Those we serve deserve it!

If you need any assistance with understanding and creating guiding principles that lead to disciples and churches that are healthy and thrive without dependency, please see the article written by Maria Gilbertson, “A Support Structure for Staying the Course,” in this issue of *Mission Frontiers*.

Will you join me in creating your own list of guiding principles of how to avoid creating unhealthy dependency in your local and global mission endeavors? 

