

Raising LOCAL Resources

by Glenn Schwartz

My Encounter with Self-Reliance Thinking

The first thing I remember about encountering self-reliance thinking happened nearly fifty years ago when I was a college student. I read a story about missionary work in Vietnam following the Indo-China war. It was about the return of missionaries to Vietnam following the devastation caused by the war. When they saw the ruined pastors' houses, the missionaries felt compassion and wanted to help rebuild. The local people, however, had other ideas. They asked the missionaries not to help, saying that it was their privilege to rebuild their own pastors' houses. That was a very small seed sown in my thinking a long time ago.

The second experience that brought this issue to my attention happened when I served as a missionary in Zambia in the 1960s. Several Zambian believers and I were sitting under a grass shelter discussing their desire to start a church in the village. They wanted to know if there would be outside funding available to provide a building. I noticed that they constructed the shelter in which we were sitting using only local material. I also noticed that next to us there was a grocery store made with burnt brick and a metal roof. I asked if the missionaries built the grocery store for them. They were happy to say, "Of course not, we did it ourselves." A few more seeds were sown in my thinking. That was in 1967—about twenty years before I began to deal in-depth with self-reliance issues.

My third experience was an encounter with a small book written by an Assemblies of God missionary by the name of Melvin Hodges. The book is called *The Indigenous Church*. Many people credit Melvin Hodges with getting them to think



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seriously about indigenous principles and issues of local sustainability. I first read it in the 1960s, but a year or two ago I picked it up and read it again. I discovered that many of the things I have been saying about dependency over the last several decades are direct quotes from Melvin Hodges. It was a good reminder of where I got many of my ideas.

The fourth thing that brought self-reliance thinking to my attention happened when I enrolled in formal missionary training following missionary service in Africa. At the Fuller Seminary School of World Mission (now School of Intercultural Studies) I was introduced to three books written by missiologist Roland Allen. Those books are *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours*, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*, and *The Missionary Principle*.

According to Allen, the great missionary principle is the work of the Holy Spirit. I have concluded that avoiding or overcoming unhealthy dependency is not so much economic, social or theological as it is spiritual. In other words, we should not expect people who are not genuinely committed to the Lord to joyfully put tithes and offerings into the church collection.

The fifth thing that influenced my thinking on issues of indigeneity and self-support came from listening to and interacting with hundreds of church leaders and missionaries while traveling in Africa from 1984 to the present. Many times, church leaders or missionaries would say, "Let me tell you my story." Recently I was in Canada speaking on self-reliance issues. One man in the audience spoke up saying that he had been a missionary in Botswana for twelve years. As he was preparing for his return to Canada, the local churches in Botswana took a collection equal to US\$1000 to help him and his family relocate back home. He made a point of saying that some of the churches doing the giving were poor churches. Like others, this missionary learned how humbling it can be to receive from those who give out of their relative poverty.

Conclusion

Notice that my understanding grew over a long period of time. One does not grasp issues like this instantaneously. Anyone planning to work through issues of dependency and self-reliance should allow time for prayer, discussion, reading, reflection and growth in understanding. Don't be disappointed if progress is not as fast as you had once hoped. But, with determination, progress can be made and both you and others stand to benefit. God bless you on the journey. f