

Raising LOCAL Resources

by Glenn Schwartz

God-Inspired Local Creativity

Since 1961 I have been traveling in Africa, primarily East, Central and Southern Africa. In the past five decades I have heard hundreds of stories reflecting the creativity with which God has blessed the church in Africa. When people find out what I am concerned about, they love to tell stories illustrating what can be done when people begin to look for and discover local resources.

As I have often said before, this does not mean that outside resources are not needed, given the vast amount

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of human need we see in our world. What becomes clear, however, is that the indiscriminate infusion of outside resources can so easily cripple or destroy local creativity, which is sometimes fragile at best. It is often assumed that

what people have to give back to God is too little or too insignificant to be of any use. Even in situations where poverty seems to prevail, it has been shown that people can often find something to give to God when they are encouraged or inspired to do so.

A Biblical Example

One needs to look no further than the New Testament to see the truth of what I am saying. In 2 Corinthians 8 the Apostle Paul tells about taking a collection for those in need in Jerusalem. This was a collection taken from one of the mission churches he planted for the “mother” church in Jerusalem. There is no place in the New Testament where Paul’s mission churches received contributions from the mother church. What Paul says about the Macedonian believers



Glenn Schwartz is Executive Director of World Mission Associates, based in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The author welcomes interaction by e-mail at glennschwartz@msn.com.

is most striking. He describes them as being in severe trial and extreme poverty, yet he says “they begged for the privilege of giving”. We must be careful not to assume that people—even those living in either relative or absolute poverty—have nothing to give back to God.

Observation

I am fascinated by the creativity that is evident as I hear one story after another on the African continent. In the Nov/Dec 2007 issue of *Mission Frontiers*, I told the story of a church in West Africa that raised more than a hundred thousand dollars for evangelism—starting with an egg. Many people were inspired by that story, although someone responded by saying that any project beginning with giving an egg is no match for petro-dollars coming into Africa from the Middle East. The sheer success of the project is evidence that beginning with an egg is indeed a match for petro-dollars. Remember that petro-dollars are foreign funding while the egg represents something given from the hearts of local people. Dedicated believers who give from the little they have watch it become multiplied by the presence of the Holy Spirit. By the way, in that story, those who began with an egg planted thirty-three congregations in their evangelism effort.

Examples of Local Creativity

One of the more creative people I encountered over the years is a man in Central Africa whom I shall call Jon. He made a commitment to challenge his fellow believers to look for local resources rather than to look for those from far away.

Knowing that Jon had a reputation for fundraising from local resources, his pastor one day asked him to give a challenge to their congregation in the Sunday morning service. Allowing his imagination to flow, Jon found a hand woven African basket that was about eighteen inches in diameter and three inches deep. It is the kind used to throw grain in the air to allow chaff to fly away. Jon took the basket to church that morning and during his presentation put it on the floor, referring to it as the morning offering basket. He then stepped inside the basket to demonstrate that his offering that day was himself showing that “the Lord wants all of me—given for God’s glory.”

Little did Jon realize how his simple illustration would be used to impact the congregation. He did notice that while he was speaking some people were sniffing and wiping tears. In due course, the collection was taken and the worship service ended. Jon did not know how much was given in the collection. It was about suppertime when Jon got a call from the treasurer saying, “I just wanted to let you know that in this morning’s collection we

received more than we usually get in three months in this congregation.”

On another occasion Jon had the opportunity to speak to another congregation. He found that at the beginning of the service they took their normal collection which amounted to about 15,000 units of local currency—about average for that congregation. Jon found the Lord inspiring him to challenge the congregation to consider giving something in addition to the normal offering. He noticed that there was no pulpit from which the pastor could speak—only a low coffee table—the one on which the offering had been placed. He reminded the congregation that when God speaks to them each Sunday, it is through His servant, the pastor. He asked if it would not be reasonable for them to provide a pulpit from which God’s servant could speak. They agreed. So he asked them to bring another offering so that they could buy a pulpit. When they brought this (the second offering of the evening) it was enough to buy three pulpits!

But Jon was not finished yet. He presented them with yet another challenge. He said, “I noticed that when God’s servant visits you in your homes to pray for the sick, he walks to get there. Would it not be a merciful thing if you could provide at least a bicycle for him to use when he visits you? Could we not take yet another offering right now to see if a bicycle could be provided?” He then asked the treasurer to remove what was given for the pulpit. By the time the service ended, the congregation brought forward 1.3 million units of local currency. This was over and above the initial collection of 15,000 which was normally what they received. When telling the story, Jon likes to remind us that no new people arrived during the service to increase the giving. They all came with that amount of money in their pockets, and they gave it voluntarily.

Truly, when local creativity flows, the results can be dramatic. We must be sure that such creativity is not stifled by the prevalence of foreign funding which, as we all know, so often can destroy local initiative. 🌐

Rice Missions and Rice Christians

by Rick Johnson, International Action Ministries

As the years passed, I continued supporting myself by working in the construction trade while also studying part-time at a community college and working in Mexico. For a while, I worked at the Mexican municipal trash dump in Tijuana where Pastor Von had begun helping the people on his day off each week. The people there were truly a needy, hurting people. In many ways, they were friendly towards us and welcomed our visits each week. Violent things happened at the dump, mostly at night.

The homes were simple. Cardboard, tacked-on plastic, a scrap of board, an old car hood for one wall, all wrapped with wire to hold it together, and a couple of tires on top to keep the roof from blowing away. Few homes had outhouses. Fewer still had a septic hole dug underneath. It didn’t matter; everything flowed together into the dump.

The families there worked hard; at least until many well-intentioned Christian groups corrupted the dump with a mix of evangelism and welfare. As more and more groups began visiting the dump, some residents found it all too simple to just quit working altogether. The compassionate Christian visitors gave away so much stuff that the dump people could earn plenty a couple days a week in selling the American mercy gifts at swap meets. The weekends would be dedicated to “being poor” and receiving more goods from the generous Christian groups, a couple of days could be given to selling those gifts and the rest of the time, well, that’s another story.

In the early days, the people dug through the tons of trash arriving daily. First, any food still edible was picked out, then the long process of extracting treasures. A treasure was anything that had any value in itself, broken things that could be converted to useful things. A broken toy cart together with a bicycle tire rim, a piece of pipe and a broken shopping cart could be fashioned into a wheelbarrow of sorts! Then glass and metal were extracted to form piles weighing tons. This in turn was sold and the little profit yielded sustained the dump community.

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Rick and Eunice Johnson are missionaries who work throughout Latin America. International Action Ministries, their organization, is based in Southern California. For 29 years, they have served among the poor, tribal groups and in training of Latin nationals for ministry and missions.

Later I worked there with another missionary. He worked with the men of the community, joining them side by side in their struggle. A number of community development projects were carried out. My friend, Andres, had the confidence of the men, but making headway was difficult. For whatever reason, this missionary finally had a nervous breakdown, ending his work there. Things happened at the dump that perhaps twisted our views of "normal" living. Abused children, children who disappear, murder, rape, death and oppression were facts of life in the dump.

I remember one day one of my friends there called to me in a very aggravated tone. He was the head of one of the few homes that boasted a real family unit (a "husband" and "wife" and the children all from

that relationship). As I approached, I saw tears in his eyes. He cried out in anger, "We are not dogs," he motioned for me to follow him. We ducked through the low entrance of his cardboard home. "Look what my children found in the

trash today," he said. There on the floor were several aborted babies. A pile of them had been dumped "in our neighborhood," my friend cried. And, to add insult to injury, for a joke, a few more fetuses had been thrown in front of this man's humble home.

Life went on for good or for bad there. Many American Christian and secular groups found it a fantastic adventure "helping the dump people." It was their "help" which made real ministry there difficult; the community had learned a new, "adjusted" lifestyle. During the week the people would joke about "Los Evangelicos," the Evangelicals, who would come without fail every Saturday. They came with food and clothing and other gifts. The poorer that one appeared, the more he would be rewarded. And so it went; most every weekend, vans and buses and trailers would pull in over the hill to "help the dump people." With cameras flashing, food and clothing were passed out. "Rice missions" produce "rice Christians."

A few groups worked hard to really help those who needed assistance. They did all they could do to maintain the dignity of the people. These were very few and they could not hold back the tide of the multitude of groups which naively believe that Mexico can be evangelized with no more than a handful of Spanish tracts or a film and a bag of beans or rice. However, what they saw was convincing enough to them. I guess we just watched from a different perspective.

Week after week, the same people would "get saved" and be rewarded or "blessed" with some beans or rice or some other token expressing thanks for their response to the message. In time, the people learned that poverty was their most valuable resource. The worse you looked, the more you would be given. Many groups walked around like tourists in a zoo. Some would gawk and hold their noses while others clicked off photo after photo. Some groups would stand on top of their bus or van and throw food and clothing into the unruly crowd. As the people fought over the nicer items, they were photographed. In later years, some of those in the dump learned to charge for their photo. There are endless stories best left behind in that smoldering dump along with the piles of burning dogs, the aborted babies, the trash and the corruptions left by many well-meaning ministries.

Christian missions could learn a lot from the dump. Much would depend on the vantage point, I suppose. Evangelism without teaching and discipleship can be a disaster. It's happened many times. A great deal of harm and destruction can be caused by "the ministry." The sad thing is the "evangelist" may be the last to ever realize what has been done.

Another sad reality is that although Tijuana boasts of many strong Mexican churches, in the years we frequented the dump, we never saw a Mexican church attempting any ministry there. Those most capable of meeting most of the real needs would not mix with these people of the dump. I do believe that God could have done a real great work there if some, or at least one Mexican church would have really gotten involved, really taught and disciplined the people. The ministry they needed the most and those most capable of really helping them never quite arrived. The dump ended up being a fairly hopeless place to minister. In my personal opinion, in many ways, "missions" made it so. 🌐

Editor's Comment:

This actual account illustrates very well the inherent flaw in what could be called "felt need" or "symptomatic" aid. Not all homeless people are willing to "get a job" when handouts supply their basic needs. In this case, however, it is clear that the dump dwellers were already working for a living (isolating different metal or glass items, fixable items, etc.) and would have welcomed a more humane activity for making a living. But instead of mission workers going to the trouble of helping them find that more humane role, they are meeting their immediate ("felt") need for handouts they can eat or sell. That can continue forever. In order to qualify for handouts they are forced to stay "in the dump." In a case like this something more is needed than "discipling."

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