



RAISING LOCAL RESOURCES

OH, AN AMERICAN IS INVOLVED?

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Some time ago I accompanied a young Zambian church planter to Central Mozambique, where a self-reliance seminar was scheduled. We had been traveling together and doing similar seminars in Zambia and Malawi for the previous ten days or so. It is not unusual for a seminar of this kind to have attendance ranging from 30 to 120 or more. But on this occasion only six pastors turned up for the meeting.

When I inquired about the low attendance, I learned the pastors in that area were accustomed to seminars where an outsider provides the meals, accommodations, and sometimes bus fare to and from the seminar. In some places outsiders also provide “pocket money” following the meetings. We had not indicated that any of these things would be available. After all, this was to be a self-reliance seminar. We also learned that the local pastors had assumed that I was paying the Zambian church planter traveling with me, which was not the case.

Disappointed that the dependency mentality had reached this level in this area, as in many parts of the world, we conducted the seminar with the few who came and went on our way.

This story has an interesting conclusion. After we left, the local pastors discussed why the attendance was low and what kind of American was traveling with that Zambian church planter. They discovered I was not paying him, and that we were serious about the self-reliance we talked about. Several weeks later these pastors sent a message to the young church Zambian planter, apologizing for misinterpreting his motives and actions, acknowledging that he was serious about self-reliance, and inviting him to return to present a seminar on his own. He was pleased to do this.

Why do outsiders (especially short-termers) often bring all the funding for a conference or seminar?

- Outside funding ensures good attendance.
- Giving blesses the outsiders.
- High attendance creates the appearance that local people are genuinely interested.

Unfortunately, outside funding cannot ensure the content is relevant or that the long-term benefits will result. In fact, the long-term impact may become more apparent when attendance is low—as in this case.

What is the alternative?

In another part of East Africa I was asked to conduct a self-reliance seminar. Again, I was asked to cover the expenses of the seminar. Believing that covering local expenses is the privilege of those who want the services, I asked that the local believers provide my lodging and cover the cost of the seminar, including local travel, meals, etc., for all who attend. I did not ask for my international airfare to be provided, although I look forward to the day when even that will be possible as the concept of developing self-reliance takes hold. In a sense, my suggestion was a test of whether they really wanted me to come, or whether they were looking only for someone willing to cover the costs with outside resources.

As a result of my requests, local creativity was released in a truly heartening way. Despite the lack of outside funding, they still wanted me to come. They arranged an African home for me to stay in. They held the seminar in a church in a commercial area where shops and restaurants lined the street. The only charge for the use of the church building was that they

leave it as clean as they found it. For meals, everyone attending could go out on the street and buy what they wanted at their own expense. For my transportation, they found a church member with a vehicle and asked him to drive me from the house to the seminar each of the two days. The one out-of-pocket expense they had was providing a noon meal for me and the other speakers, something they could also purchase along the street. I also told them that I did not want to be the only presenter, and they complied by inviting several other speakers from the area who gave excellent presentations on self-reliance.

There is a risk in making the kind of requests I did for local funding of an event. Things do not always work out the way this one did. A Kenyan friend conducting marriage and family seminars tried something similar, and found her invitation cancelled in favor of others who provide their services free of charge. The reality is that, given a choice, locals will choose outside “specialists” who cover the cost of the seminars and conferences they conduct, and outsiders often get a good feeling from the increased attendance and the praise they receive for what they provide. These are practices and attitudes that those of us in the Global Self-Reliance Network (GSRN) are seeking to address.

My conclusion is this: If you think it feels good to be the outside provider, pursue helping local people discover for themselves the joy of giving to fund ministries that bless them. 🌐

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