

Ideas Can Be More Powerful Than Money



GLENN SCHWARTZ

An infamous leader of the Former Soviet Union once said that “ideas are more powerful than guns.” One could add that ideas can be more powerful than money as well. While money often gets used up, good ideas have the potential to keep on giving long after the initial investment is made.

To put this another way, this is about the value of an *investment of ideas* rather than normal *philanthropy*¹. Successfully communicate an idea, and you are making an investment. As I mentioned above, if ideas are introduced appropriately, they can live on in a community long after a financial contribution is used up. One problem with philanthropy is that when it is dissipated, more is often needed to replace it.

Business people speak of “return on investment” or ROI. It means that for everything invested, one should be able to expect a positive return. One of the most powerful investments we can make is an investment of ideas. Think of the amount of resources within arm’s reach of people all around the world that are waiting to be mobilized. Consider the impact when local people discover and mobilize those resources.

I am sometimes asked, “What results have you seen from the emphasis on avoiding or overcoming unhealthy dependency in the Christian movement?” Indeed, there are many positive results that show that our efforts are bearing fruit.



Glen Schwartz is Author of *When Charity Destroys Dignity: Overcoming Unhealthy Dependency in the Christian Movement* available at www.wmausa.org

In 1996 World Mission Associates (the charity of which I am a part) produced an eight-hour video series on avoiding and overcoming unhealthy dependency in the Christian movement. It is filled with suggestions (ideas) about how to do God’s work without the continual flow of outside resources which so often end up creating unsustainable projects. Since that video series was

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first produced, miles of video tape, and a lot of ink and toner have been spread around the world on self-reliance issues. Missionaries and church leaders in various parts of the world have been introduced to the idea of avoiding or overcoming unhealthy dependency. Later on, the content of the video series was transcribed and included in a book I wrote called *When Charity Destroys Dignity: Overcoming Unhealthy Dependency in the Christian Movement*.² More than ten thousand copies of the book have been circulated around the world. Hardly a day goes by that I do not hear from someone who has read the book and is making changes in their church or missionary service. I consider this video series and the resulting book to be an investment of ideas for the benefit of church and mission leaders far and wide.

But what is the impact of the ideas to which I am referring? The following are a few examples.

First, in 1997, top leaders of a large mission agency in North America (an agency with about five-thousand missionaries) acquired many copies of the video series on dependency and self-reliance to which I referred above.

They took the message seriously. As part of what they learned, they instructed their missionaries all over the world to put all institutions of their denomination into local authority. This meant that if missionaries were in charge of a Bible institute or hospital somewhere in the world, they were to find a local church leader or medical officer and turn the work over to them. Imagine the implications of that kind of an idea.

To show the seriousness with which that directive was taken, ten years later I met someone in West Africa who

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is president of one of the seminaries of that denomination. I asked if he knew about the decision that was made a decade earlier. His response was, “Yes, and that is why I, as a West African, am president of this seminary today.”

Second, last year I met a North American medical doctor who had been serving in a hospital in Ghana. He told me his story. The hospital in which he and his wife worked was sustained by outside funding and staffed by people from North America. Someone suggested that he and his wife learn about overcoming unhealthy dependency, which they did. When they finished going through the video series, they asked themselves what they should do differently based on the ideas they learned. He said, “That was ten years ago, and today that hospital is fully staffed by Ghanaians and totally supported with local resources.”

A *third* illustration comes from a small team of missionaries who went from North America to West Africa to plant churches. Their mode of operation included four-wheel drive vehicles and projectors which they used in rural areas to show pictures and preach the Gospel. Somehow they learned about the video series on overcoming unhealthy dependency. Their mission board in North America began to inquire about what it would mean to change the paradigm on which they were functioning in Ghana. After watching the video series and discussing the issues involved, they decided to make changes in their mode of operation. The missionaries got rid of the four-wheel drive vehicles and projectors. Instead, they began to use bicycles to get from village to village. They soon discovered that local Ghanaian pastors decided they could do the same; so the pastors also acquired bicycles and joined in the evangelism and church planting efforts. After some time, word of their

efforts filtered back to their American board and to me and my colleagues. This is what they said: “We just want you to know that the indigenous principles we learned work!”

In 1999 in Mozambique a group of sixty-five pastors and a handful of missionaries got together for several days to discuss how to overcome unhealthy dependency. During one of the presentations, they began to discuss when the Gospel was first preached in that region of their country. After some discussion the church leaders decided that the Gospel first came there about 1915. The next question was natural: “How many of your own missionaries have you sent out since that time?” The answer was, “None”. I responded by saying, “So apparently this gospel is for receiving, but not for sharing. Is that right?”

The question I asked startled my translator to such an extent that he asked if he could speak with his fellow pastors. I agreed and stepped aside. The translator then suggested that they all needed to confess the sin of being receivers, rather than givers in relation to the Gospel. Before the conference ended, the sixty-five pastors appointed a committee to send out their first missionaries. They sent several workers to a ripe mission field in Northern Mozambique. Later, they sent one couple to Brazil and another to Portugal where they could use the Portuguese language they already knew.

My investment in each of the above examples was the communication of ideas, not money or other resources. Of course, there was an investment of my time and resources in getting to Mozambique and in producing the video series in the first place. However, the end result was not dependent on providing resources from outside those communities. In the Mozambique situation, it was local initiative that took hold because of an idea that was planted in the hearts of the pastors.

I am not saying that financial assistance should never be given. But I am trying to show that an investment in creative ideas can be more effective in the long term than simply “doing philanthropy”. In each of the previous illustrations, relying on outside people and outside resources had often been the primary mode of operation. It was simply assumed that outside resources were the key to doing God’s work—which many people still believe today. But notice that in each story, it was later discovered that local people, empowered with local creativity and mobilizing local resources, could make the difference.

One could well ask how much outside giving would have been needed to affect that kind of change. The honest answer would be that outside resources are often likely to create and perpetuate unhealthy dependency, not avoid it or resolve it. An investment of time and ideas can be

far more effective than philanthropy alone ever could be. But remember, there are times when philanthropy is well justified, but care should be given that it does not replace the mobilization of local resources.

The return on an investment of ideas can have a long-lasting and far-reaching impact. Imagine five-thousand missionaries changing their mode of operation! One should not underestimate that kind of change. It is a massive thing to consider, because missionary philosophy and practice are often very deeply rooted. I invite missionaries and church leaders to consider an investment in mobilizing local resources, and then watch to see how much can be done.

Conclusion

One final word is in order. The reason I challenge churches and church-related institutions to strive for sustainability is so that they can focus on spiritual renewal and bringing people to faith in Christ. I am not just promoting an economic or missiological phi-

losophy. And, I do not minimize the role of the Holy Spirit in the process. Our Lord, through His Spirit, inspires people to identify and mobilize their resources in Kingdom ministry. Therefore, the power of the Holy Spirit is the most important “idea” that should permeate all that we do.

There will also be the need to help the truly poor, but being a continual receiver is not good for the dignity of either the giver or the receiver. I trust that church and mission leaders far and wide will discover the benefit and reward of mobilizing local resources which leads those in need not only to stand on their own two feet with joy, but also to be able to help others in need. And that is an idea with a return on investment worth promoting.^f

1. I acknowledge that philanthropy can represent more than money, but for my purposes here I am referring primarily to financial philanthropy.
2. This book is available on the website of World Mission Associates at www.wmausa.org.

The advertisement features a central circular graphic with overlapping shades of gray. On the left, there is a small image of the 'Global Prayer Digest' cover for August 2009, showing a woman in prayer with her hands clasped. The cover text includes 'Spiritual Cleansing and the Ganges River' and a list of daily prayer topics. To the right of the image, the text reads: 'Today 73,000 people around the world will pray for a specific unreached people group.' Further right, the text says 'you can join them!' in a large, bold font. At the bottom left, it says 'For free downloads, go to: globalprayerdigest.org'. At the bottom right, it says 'For subscription: (626) 398-2249 or subscriptions@uscwm.org \$12/year within the United States.' In the background of the right side, there is a faint circular logo for the 'U.S. CENTER FOR WORLD MISSION' with the text 'FOR MAKING GOD'S VOICES HEARD'.