

A HAND-OUT, HAND UP, OR HAND ACROSS?

THE SAYING “A HAND UP, not a handout,” has been popularized over the last decade. The phrase was created to move people away from the trend of giving handouts and charity in chronic poverty situations, which often leaves people in the same condition and even makes it worse at times. A hand up refers to methods of helping people to help themselves by giving them the life skills, tools, experiences, and resources to be self-sufficient. In other words, a person, agency or church extends their hand (resources) to help the less fortunate get up on their feet and progress forward.

But when it comes to all things global missions, I wonder if there is another manner and approach we should add to this list: *a hand across*. What do I mean by “a hand across,” and why do I suggest this approach in spreading the gospel and making disciples?

Giving handouts and giving a hand up still put people in a kind of unequal relationship. The one who gives the handout or the one who gives the hand up still comes across as the superior one, the expert, the foreign aid person, and the fixer. In these cases, it is obvious who are considered the vulnerable, poor, and weak ones and who are the smart, wealthy, and strong ones.

Based on my experience, I would conclude that most missionaries conduct themselves as the experts, the fixers, and the solution jumpers in their host-countries. Most missionaries don't seem to need much

from those they live among; they tend to find solutions and meet their needs elsewhere (other missionaries, their organizations, professional services, hired-hands, etc.)

But I wonder if there is room for, and a need for, a hand-across approach to missions. In this case, the cross-cultural worker and the local people view each other as mutual friends and as people who truly need each other. No one seems on top or more superior or less needful of the others. In this respect, the cross-cultural servant would need to avoid being the money bags or the powerhouse, but rather bring their one or two slices of bread to the loaf, so to speak. They would contribute, but not over contribute or outshine those around them. They would gift and share, but it would be less of a transactional culture (exchange based on money) and more about sharing ideas, labor, and friendship, and fanning into flame that which is already there.

There are several distinct benefits to sharing the gospel and making disciples from this context, posture, and approach:


- Authenticity is a product of mutual servanthood, sharing, and true interdependence. Authenticity is really difficult to come by when money and the perception of power come into the relationship.
- Others say, “I can do this!”
- Sharing is NOT reduced to the monetary, financial transactions,

and professionalism, but rather allows for voluntary gifting of shared work, time, ideas, relationships, and resources as a lifestyle.

- The cross-cultural Christian worker will have to rely on their gifts of creativity, of building relationships, listening, and of being present, which is quite persuasive in making disciples.
- It protects against passing on a worldview of consumerism and materialism.
- It creates a relational and communal atmosphere of sharing evident in the gospels and in the book of Acts.

My aim is not to criticize handouts and a hand up, but rather to invite dialogue and a bit of dreaming about an approach to missions that is under highlighted, a hand across . . . where monetary transactions are not dominant, but where being needed by others and needing others are more on an equal plane.

No one seems to be teaching Westerners how to do missions from this degree of vulnerability . . . to have to trust in those around them on a regular basis.

A hand-across approach allows the gospel, church, and the Kingdom of God to spring up from the culture and the natural resources of the people. In this manner, local resources are maximized and forms contextualized. 

BY JEAN JOHNSON

Jean@wmausa.org

Jean Johnson is the director of Five Stones Global, formerly known as World Mission Associates.