Mission Co-Dependency

Its Symptoms, Long-Term Effects and Prevention

BY **DAVID BOGOSIAN**

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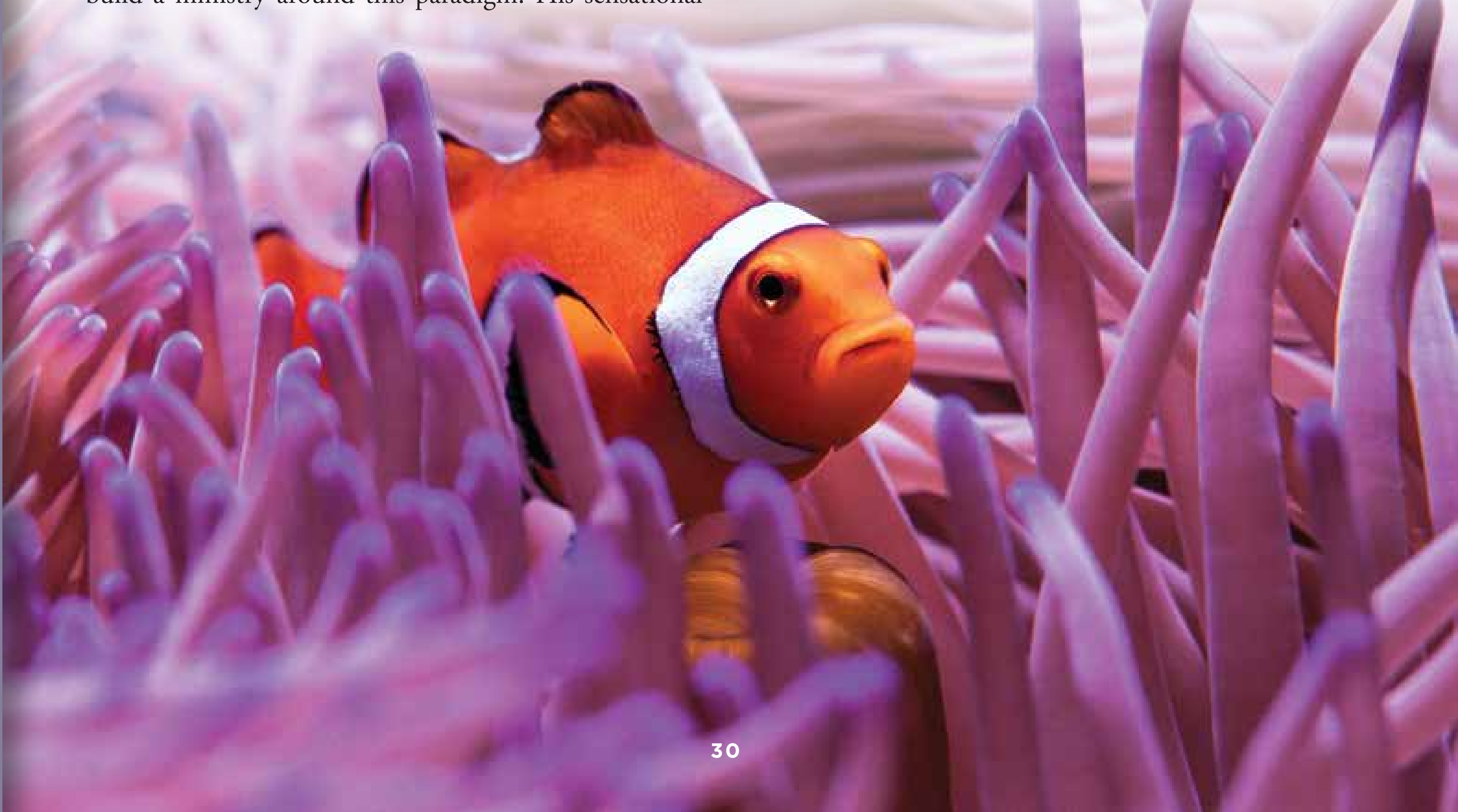
Editor's Note: The following article comes from the perspective of those who believe in foreign funding of indigenous mission work. The article provides some helpful insight into the many problems that can arise from foreign funding as well as some potential solutions. The other authors in this issue would generally take the position that any foreign funding is dangerous to the development of indigenous Kingdom Movements and that the funds to fuel the harvest should come from the harvest field.

Ralph Winter called it the Gutzlaff Syndrome. Named after one of the earliest fiascos in Protestant mission history, the Gutzlaff Syndrome is a form of mission co-dependency where the patrons and clients of a mission-field endeavor become mutually dependent on pseudo-results in a field-based con. You may be wondering, "Does this really happen?" It does, and more often than you might think.

Karl Gutzlaff was a "missionary" to China in the 19th century who began promoting the idea of paying Chinese nationals to do evangelism and church-planting. He may have been the first person in mission history to build a ministry around this paradigm. His sensational promotion of the potential of native evangelists is what inspired a young Hudson Taylor to believe the whole of China could be rapidly evangelized. Of course, Karl was half-right. The problem was he didn't understand enough of Chinese culture to know he was being duped. None of the reports he was receiving were true. His "evangelists" turned out to be con-artists.

The nature of the Gutzlaff Syndrome is that its deception becomes self-perpetuating. In the beginning the deception is almost always unwitting, but in the end it becomes a necessity. After a while the implications of fraud become too great when large amounts of money are raised and



spent. Over time the co-opted fundraisers become increasingly reluctant to conduct the due diligence required to verify results and are more likely to overlook any anomalies that may call them into question. In the end, they themselves become part of the deception.

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In a contemporary case, a US based denominational mission began a partnership with a ministry in South Asia that was reporting fantastic results. They sent a research team over to document the work and gathered tens of thousands of names of supposed believers from multiple villages. Though it was all a con, the "missionaries" had no clue for years. Like mice racing through a museum, they saw everything and understood nothing. This con would have likely continued for many more years were it not for one of the lieutenants of the scheme confessing to it all. He felt he had not been properly compensated for his work and so he spilled the beans. When he was interviewed later about how the con worked, he explained that it was his job to organize meetings for the researchers and missionaries of pseudo-believers. He would coach the hired participants on what to say and how to respond, even to say hallelujah and amen in unison. Yet none of these people were actually followers of Christ.

Could this con have been avoided? Very likely. This wasn't the first time it was done, and it wouldn't be the last. After this "ministry leader" conned this denominational mission board, he went on to do the same to others. He was able to do this because American and Western missionaries very seldom conduct due diligence when selecting national partners. Increasingly these "missionaries" (sometimes called "strategy coordinators") are not even fluent in the local languages, and have a minimal understanding of the culture. They come in like power brokers and deal makers. They are the "trainers" and knowledge "experts." This unfortunate cocktail of ignorance and arrogance makes them easy prey in patron-client cultures where the "expertise" is really on the side of the clients. Yet even for such cowboy apostles, the fraud perpetuated against them is usually avoidable. When mission fraud happens it is rarely the first time for the actors involved. In almost every case, these Western patrons of goodwill are averse to asking around. They want to trust, they want to believe, they are eager to be a part. To put it bluntly, we are often willing suckers.

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As Western missions begin to transition into a new era that missiologist Tom Steffen calls the "facilitator era," these types of problems are becoming increasingly common. In the "facilitator era," Western missionaries and organizations work principally with national partners to achieve their common aims. On the one hand, this new era makes a lot of sense. National missionaries are doing the majority of the pioneering, frontier mission work today. They have an abundance of manpower, and we have the greatest disposable wealth in human history. American foreign mission expenditures are now over 10 billion dollars a year. As a tacit validation of Tom Steffen's paradigm, today the vast majority of this money ends up in the hands of national partners.

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While enormous good has resulted from these relationships, the effects of corrupted partnerships are especially amplified in frontier mission contexts. When fraud occurs in a well-established field it can be more readily absorbed. But in frontier, pioneering contexts it can be devastating beyond repair due to the fragility of the emerging church. One of the tragic long-term repercussions are its effects on the gospel itself and the reputation of the Christian faith. If non-believers get the impression that Christianity in their culture is a Western financed invasion and its local actors are mere mercenaries seeking to profit from it, the reputation of true followers of Christ may all be called into question for many years to come.

To avoid such catastrophes there are seven rules every Western partner should consider adopting before entering into long-term partnerships with national believers, especially in frontier mission contexts:

1 Check your agenda at the airport.

The biggest source of problems in partnerships with local believers is when we come in with our programs and brilliant solutions. The best and most productive vision is always the indigenous one. Avoid the posture of being the "expert" and come as a servant.

2 Remember it's about relationship.

Good partnerships take time, so go slow. Yes, we want to hurry up and evangelize the world— it is our natural tendency. But when we get out of step with the Holy Spirit we get into trouble. Start simple, and try to keep it that way. Remember our God works in terms of centuries and millennia to accomplish his purposes.

3 Don't exceed capacity and sustainability.

Has the ministry ever done before what you are now doing together? Is there a proven track record of faithfulness and fruitfulness? Most importantly, when the funds are gone will the work continue? Effective outside funding should increase capacity to grow without compromising the ability to sustain the work long term.

4 Ensure there is both internal and external accountability.

Make sure you know how funds are handled. Most problems can be avoided right here. How are decisions made within the ministry? Are the ministry leader's personal funds co-mingled with project funds? If there is a building project, who owns the land? If there is a business, who owns the assets? Ask all the common-sense questions you can think of. Most importantly make sure that the ministry leader is accountable to other leaders that are not under his or her control, and make sure there are internal controls for good accounting and fund management.

5 Ask around, but reserve judgment about a potential partner.

Ask other missionaries, ask other national believers, and talk to ex-staff if you can. Remember that just because you hear something that isn't positive doesn't mean it's true. Sadly, in the competitive environment for foreign funding, it is all too common for false rumors to spread. Nonetheless, you should be aware of what others think in the local culture, while being open to reserving judgment.

6 Don't tie results to funding.

The moment you give economic incentive for glowing reports, you have changed the nature of your relationship. In a patron-client culture, the job of the client is to keep the patron happy by whatever means necessary. This is the source of endless problems in corrupted partnerships. As a general mission rule, if it sounds too good to be true, it almost always is. Attrition and setbacks are a normal part of any mission endeavor. It's a red flag if you never hear of any!

7 Listen to the Holy Spirit and don't stop asking.

At the end of the day, no partnership should be engaged without significant prayer and discernment. This really should be the first and last rule! The more people you have praying over it and into it, the greater the safeguards you will have in any healthy partnership.

Keep in step with the Spirit and remember God's pace often involves waiting before moving.