Hiring National Missionaries: A Good Idea?

"*Given the limitations that we have in funding and personnel, wouldn't it make sense to hire nationals as missionaries? After all, there are plenty of good candidates out there, and besides, we could hire five nationals, or perhaps even more, for what it costs to keep one LC-MS missionary and his family on the field. Think of what we could do for the Kingdom, and they already know the culture and language!*"

The above statement appears to make sense. At a time when LC-MS World Mission is suffering from funding cutbacks and experiencing difficulty identifying and recruiting good candidates for mission service, it is only logical to search for ways to maximize the resources we have. Hiring national missionaries could be a way to mobilize many more evangelists and church planters, thereby enhancing the impact that LC-MS World Mission can make toward the extension of God's Kingdom. Maybe we are entering a new era, an era in which we need to be more entrepreneurial in our approaches to mission work. Moreover, it is evident that the days of the old model of sending huge teams of missionaries from the U.S. to reach a particular group of people are long gone.

Nevertheless, lessons learned from the history of Christian missions, and the missiological reflection that has taken place through the years, cause us to pause for some careful thought before embracing and implementing such ideas uncritically. The purpose of this short article is to raise a number of issues, pro and con, and provoke critical deliberation on the topic of hiring national missionaries. It is hoped that this reflection will be done in a way that is helpful to the Area Directors as they develop their strategies and plans.

Lessons from History

The idea of hiring "national missionaries" is not new. In the era of the "modern missionary movement," which had its beginning in the late 18th century during the time of figures such as William Carey, we note first the ideas of two mission leaders from the middle of the 19th century; Henry Venn, General Secretary of the Church Mission Society in London, and Rufas Anderson, Senior Secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in the United States. They were convinced that the operation and growth of the church in any location did not depend upon the infusion of foreign money, which usually brought with it foreign manipulation, but rather "for the sake of its own spiritual health" mission work should be carried out so as not to make a church dependent on outside funding in order to function properly and do its part in the extension of God's Kingdom.[1] It is hard to know which of them, Anderson or Venn, first formulated the idea of the "3-self church,"[2] for they were in continual communication during their careers, sharing their ideas with each other. Venn is said to have been particularly motivated by an experience he had with a man from Sierra Leone who visited him in London. Venn asked, "How is it that you can afford to make the trip all the way here to London to do business, but the Christians in Sierra Leone seem too immature to support and

[1] Beyerhaus, Peter. *The Responsible Church and the Foreign Mission*, p. 27.

[2] That is, self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. Today it is common to speak of a "4th-self," that of "self-theologizing," in an attempt to define the nature of an indigenous church.

govern their own churches?" The man answered, "As soon as you and your missionaries begin to treat the brethren in Sierra Leone as capable adults, they will begin to act like capable adults."

Historians of mission have not always judged positively the results of Anderson and Venn's insistence on strategies leading toward the development of "3-self" churches; however, as Bosch stresses, it is possible that the failure of their plans, at least in part, was because their own missionaries had subverted them.[3]

Perhaps more to the point of the issue of hiring national missionaries and how it has been dealt with in history is the work of John Nevius during the later part of the 19th century. Nevius had been a missionary in China for many years when, in 1885, he was asked to write up his ideas on missionary strategies (what we today would call *missiology*) in a series of articles for the *Chinese Recorder*. Even then, over 100 years ago, Nevius made a comparison between what he called the "Old System" and the "New System." In his interesting form of expression, he said in the introduction to his first article: "These two systems may be distinguished in general by the former depending largely on paid native agency, while the latter deprecates and seeks to minimize such agency."[4] In other words, it was common practice, and thought to be common sense, to employ the brightest and best natives as missionaries. Nevius and his colleagues, however, challenged that view and contended that in the long run these individuals could and would do much for the church, not as employees of the mission, but rather if left to their congregations, homes and regular jobs.[5] According to Nevius, his colleagues were already then discarding the "Old System" because "it did not work, or it worked evil."[6]

For Nevius, the issue of *precedent* was important, on the level both of what is practiced on the field and what the Scriptures demonstrate. His reading of the record on the establishment of the early church and the writings of Paul led him to conclude, regarding the practice of hiring local Christians to serve as evangelistic agents, that "such a course is without precedent in the Bible."[7]

On the purely practical level, he demonstrated with several examples how the hiring of national agents had complicated and compromised gospel proclamation in his field of activity, China. One principal objection he made is that the hiring of a native agent reduced significantly his credibility: "Take a man laboring on the plane of his ordinary life as an earnest Christian and make him a paid laborer, and you deprive him of half his influence."[8] It is for this reason that he put great weight on the command of Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:20 and 24: "Let each man abide in

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[3] Bosch, David J. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. p. 332. For a helpful summary and evaluation of the ideas of Anderson and Venn compared to other missiological approaches, see especially Beyerhaus, Peter, *The Responsible Church and the Foreign Mission*.

[4] Nevius, John L. *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, p. 8.

[5] *Ibid.,* p. 8. He adds: "Perhaps an equally correct and more generally acceptable statement of the difference would be, that, while both alike seek ultimately the establishment of independent, self-reliant, and aggressive native churches, the Old System strives by the use of foreign funds to foster and stimulate the growth of the native churches in the first stage of their development, and then gradually to discontinue the use of such funds; while those who adopt the New System think that the desired object may be best attained by applying principles of independence and self-reliance from the beginning. The difference between these two theories may be more clearly seen in their outward practical working. The Old uses freely, and as far as practicable, the more advanced and intelligent of the native church members in the capacity of paid *colporteurs*, Bible agents, evangelists, or heads of stations; while the New proceeds on the assumption that the persons employed in these various capacities *would be more useful in the end by being left in their original homes and employments* (emphasis added).

[6] *Ibid*., p. 9.

[7] *Ibid*., p. 59.

[8] *Ibid*., p. 22.

that calling wherein he was called." Nevius saw a practical purpose in Paul's injunction, for he felt strongly that the extension of the kingdom could best be served when Christians communicate the gospel by deed and word in their natural and normal social settings.[9]

In the first part of the 20th century, Roland Allen and the World Dominion Movement began publishing essays and books on mission theory. The ideas of Roland Allen (d. 1947) are well known. This article will not go into great detail regarding Allen's thoughts on mission practice; however, there are a couple of interesting points that underlie Allen's and the WDM's views on the subject of finances and how they are used.

First, Allen was convinced that the growth of the church depended, not on money, but on the power of the Holy Spirit. For Allen, money does not aid in the extension of the kingdom, but, in fact, most often actually hinders it. Allen asserted that there is a direct relationship between Paul's success as an evangelist and church planter and the way he dealt with issues of finance. He contended that there were three principles that Paul followed: (1) He never took money *from* his converts; (2) He never gave money *to* his converts; and (3) Every church administered *its own funds*.[10]

Building upon the ideas of Allen, Merle Davis published an important work in 1947 entitled, *New Buildings on Old Foundations*. Interesting were his views on the great economic disparity between the European and North American nations from which missionaries came and the peoples to whom they proposed to preach the gospel (a disparity that in many cases today has grown even more) and how that disparity affects the growth of the new churches. He asserted that Western churches have failed to deal with this issue redemptively because they are too influenced by what he calls "economic determinism," that is, the belief that money is the determining factor in every sphere of life.[11] One must wonder if, in our materialistic age, the temptation of "economic determinism" is not even more powerful, and if it does not infect our ideas on how the gospel grows.

This is only a brief summary of the thinking of a few important figures in the history of protestant missionary theory. It is presented mostly to show that the challenges with which we are struggling today are not new, nor is the idea of hiring native agents. Indeed, over 100 years ago, Nevius said it was "only natural" to think of hiring national agents.[12] It seems logical. But let us also look at this from the perspective of our context today, and turn to some pros and cons as we consider this matter.

Reasons for Hiring National Missionaries:

1. *National missionaries are less expensive to support than Western missionaries*. We are acutely aware of the cost of maintaining a Western missionary and his family on a foreign

[9] William Weinrich, in his article, "Evangelism in the Early Church," stresses that the most effectual evangelism, which had the greatest impact toward the spread of Christianity during the time of the early church, was that which was carried out by common Christians in the context of the relationships germane to their normal vocations, family life and social interactions.

[10] Allen, Roland. *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours*, pp. 49-59.

[11] Beyerhaus, p. 41.

[12] Nevius, p. 11. Can LC-MS missionaries today relate to these comments? In his treatment of the logic of the Old Method, Nevius states: "[Missionaries] are anxious for *immediate results*, and *home societies and the home churches are as impatient to hear of results as missionaries are to report them*. No communications from the field seem so indicative of progress, and are so calculated to call forth commendation and generous contributions, as the announcement that native laborers have been obtained, and are preaching gospel" (emphasis added).

field. While we could argue for a more austere lifestyle on the part of our missionaries,[13] the fact of the matter is that it costs generally between $70,000 and $100,000 per year to maintain an LC-MS career missionary on the field. In many places around the world, that sum of money would be the equivalent of the salary of anywhere between ten and twenty national pastors. In other words, for a fraction of the cost of maintaining one foreign missionary on the field, several national missionaries could be hired. Moreover, in most cases, the national missionary is already living in or near the area of his service, and so the cost of making the transition to full-time mission service would be minimal.

2. *Nationals already know the language and the culture*. Foreign missionaries, in order to do their jobs well, spend years learning the new culture and language. The effort required for language acquisition and cultural understanding cannot be underestimated, as any of our LC-MS missionaries who have bothered to do so can attest to. And even if a missionary gains a functional use of the language, the process of improving language skills and cultural understanding is on-going during an entire lifetime. A foreigner's use of the language will never be completely natural. Given the importance of communicating the gospel clearly and accurately, a national, who has spoken the language from childhood and intimately understands the culture, will have tremendous advantages over the foreign missionary. He will be able to communicate the gospel in categories more readily understandable to the people.

3. *There are more candidates among nationals for missionary service than available from the LC-MS*. The LC-MS is facing a severe shortage of clergy, which, in turn, has made it increasingly difficult to find candidates who are willing or qualified to serve in an overseas mission. There are many vacant churches in the U.S., which means more opportunity for pastors, as well as more need. Instead of draining off the limited resources the LC-MS has to fill its pastoral vacancies, it would seem prudent and helpful to utilize the services of nationals to fill some of the vacant mission positions. In some places, there are plenty of good, bright, and energetic people who would make capital co-workers and mission team members. With the economic opportunities being as limited as they are for many of our national workers, why not utilize some of them, thereby creating a "win-win" situation: LC-MS World Mission's impact is maximized by having more workers, and some national Christians have a steady income.

4. *National missionaries can sometimes have ready access to countries that would be closed to a U.S. missionary*. Given recent world events, it may become all the more dangerous for North Americans to travel to many parts of the world. In some cases, a hired national missionary could get into places and work among people that would be inaccessible to someone from the United States.

5. *It could encourage some nationals to be involved in God's mission who otherwise would not be able to do so*. Without a doubt, many nationals would like to be missionaries, but their home churches are too weak and poor to send and support them. By hiring national missionaries, many individuals would be encouraged, enabled, and empowered to do their part in missions. They could be an entirely new force for the extension of God's kingdom in today's "globalized" world.

[13] This point-of-view is argued persuasively by Jonathan Bonk in his book, *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem*.

Caveats to Hiring National Missionaries:

1. *There is no clear biblical precedence*. There is no evidence in the Scripture for a system whereby those who were going forth to evangelize a certain people group hire local agents. In fact, there is little talk about money or finances in the biblical record of the first days of the church, which, on the other hand, does not mean that certain practices were not common. While the argument from silence does not prove that something is *wrong* to do, one would hope for some evidence that a certain practice had been successfully employed. Allen and Nevius both have demonstrated that Paul was very careful to assure that financial considerations did not get in the way of genuine proclamation of the gospel and Christian conversion. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul makes it clear that those who preach and teach the word have a right to be supported *by those whom he teaches*, but even in that case, Paul refused to accept support from the Corinthians "rather than hinder the gospel of Christ" (9:12). Perhaps that is why Jesus, too, instructed the disciples, "Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts" (Matthew 10:9). He did not want anything, especially money, to get in the way simple, pure gospel proclamation.

2. *Gifted workers may be lured away from the local congregation where they are sorely needed*. While no one can blame someone for wanting to progress in this life and attain financial security, it is a sad fact that many of the brightest and best citizens of poorer countries have been lured away by the opportunities offered by the more powerful, richer nations. Those who, because of their talents and education, could do the most for their nation are siphoned off, to, in effect, make the richer nations richer. It is called the "brain drain," and is a very real phenomenon. Do we want to be guilty of the very same thing? Several of the best Lutheran pastors in Latin America, for example, have been lured to the U.S. by district presidents of the LC-MS, thereby creating a void in leadership in the local churches. Hiring nationals as missionaries could produce a similar effect.

3. *It may (likely will) cause jealousy and envy among nationals who are not allowed to receive a salary from abroad*. It is only natural that pastors or workers from a partner church will begin to ask, "Why should he get a salary from the LC-MS when I am left to struggle and barely eek out a living?" Soon there will be competition among the national workers to get the lucrative position with the mission. Those who are not chosen will harbor feelings of hurt and resentment, both toward the mission organization and the hired missionary.

4. *People may be drawn into missionary service for the money and not out of love for the spread of the gospel*. As Nevius put it, "The Employment System tends to excite a mercenary spirit, and to increase the number of mercenary Christians."[14] Without a doubt there are many fine Christians who would carry out their work as a hired missionary with dedication and zeal, but experience has shown that the possibility of monetary gain does not always attract the best and most devoted people to ministry. There were plenty of "professional" preachers during the time of the early church, but they are often depicted as charlatans who preach "out of selfish ambition" (Philippians 1:17).

5. *The selection process can be very difficult to manage*. It is commonly accepted that foreign missionaries do not always select the leaders that the local people would select to exercise spiritual authority over them. The foreign missionary often chooses someone for training in the ministry who is most like him in terms of education, language, and attitudes. Often this is someone who does not seem to have much else going on so that he can spend a lot of time with the missionary, "helping" him. It often has been the case that such a person is

[14] Nevius, p. 15.

eventually chosen by the missionary for training and placement in a mission/ministry situation. Unfortunately, it is also often the case that the local people would *never* have chosen or named that person for such a position of spiritual leadership. Local people know things or observe things about the candidate that the foreigner cannot know or observe, or simply the characteristics of the individual do not fit the characteristics in that culture of someone who can credibly serve in a leadership position. How will the hired national missionary be chosen, who will decide, and how can we be sure we are selecting the best and most credible candidate?

6. *National missionaries who are paid from abroad may be seen as foreign agents*. This is perhaps one of the most crucial factors to remember when considering the hiring of national missionaries. It has to do with the question of credibility. Frequently the hired national worker's credibility in spiritual matters is all but destroyed when employed by an outside mission. People will think, "Of course he is telling me these things, that is what the foreigners have hired him to do." How much more meaningful and effective is the gospel witness of a fellow countryman who is ministering to his neighbor voluntarily, out of love and concern for his hurting fellow human being! James Bergquist and Kambar Manickam noted this phenomenon in India over twenty-five years ago. Their study discovered that while there was a system of paid national evangelists, pastors and workers in place, over ninety percent of the actual work of mission and ministry was being carried out by voluntary workers who evangelized and ministered in their setting out of their love for the Lord.[15]

7. *Normal accountability structures become obscured or are short-circuited*. It is true that every Christian is accountable to God, but on the human level, the lack of natural accountability structures has invariably led to difficulties. Sinful human nature being what it is, it generally has been observed that those involved in mission and ministry should be accountable to their constituency. This implies that a worker has a "constituency," that is, those to whom he must be accountable for his actions and words. Just as devastating as actual malfeasance, in many cases, is simply the appearance of malfeasance, or even the possibility of malfeasance. When the natural accountability structures are interfered with, the way is open for a whole range of complex, potentially damaging situations. Unless there is some sort of true and equal partnership, including finances and accountability with the local church, this will become just another form of subsidy. While such partnerships are not impossible, they are very difficult to maintain and are open to all sorts of misunderstandings.

8. *It may discourage stewardship in local churches who should be sending and supporting their own missionaries*. Soon local churches will get the impression that what is possible for the rich foreign mission organization is not possible for them. At the same time, they may reason, "Why should we worry about sending missionaries when we can send our own through the outside mission agency?" Thus, the mission spirit and zeal of the local, national church is diminished; or, worse yet, the local Christians are robbed of the joy of doing their part in the extension of God's kingdom. The use of our economic power to employ national missionaries may hinder the development of a truly missionary national church.

9. *The actual cost of sending national workers may not be as little as originally thought*. If it is necessary to provide training in missiology, cross-cultural communication, linguistics,

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[15] Bergquist, James A. and P. Kambar Manickam. *The Crisis of Dependency in Third World Ministries: A Critique of Inherited Missionary Forms in India.* The predominance of the models of ministry and mission work "inherited" from Western missionaries is the primary concern of this study: "Just as dependency upon Western models and goals makes economic development with justice impossible today, so dependency upon Western missionary-inherited models of ministry may threaten the emergence of vigorous and involved Christian service in local situations" p. 2.

etc., the actual cost of sending a national missionary will rise dramatically. In addition, if the national missionaries are working at a salary scale less than that of the U.S. missionary, resentment and an eventual demand for an equal salary will certainly come to pass, experience shows. Other costs, like health insurance, retirement benefits, evacuation insurance, visa costs, etc., can mount up so that the total cost soon approaches that of sending a U.S. missionary. One major difference is that the U.S. missionary has the potential to raise the necessary support from his constituency back home, something that is unlikely for the national missionary.

10. *Since the Westerners will hold the purse strings, they will hold the power.* Anyone with significant experience in church-mission relationships knows that missionaries unwittingly have wielded great power in the activities of national churches because of the money they have control over. The missionaries who do the hiring of the national missionaries, even when with all best intentions the Western missionary leader tries to avoid it, can use this power in a very coercive way. This, in turn, can have an adverse effect on the ability of the paid national missionaries to proclaim the word of God contextually, because, as paid agents, they will shape the message they preach, not according to the needs of the local people, who should be their constituency, but rather according to the vision of their employer, the outside missionary agency. The result is that the "prophetic voice" of the church is stifled.[16] Sometimes people wielding money wield power without even knowing that they do it. It is not only the tyrannical power monger who may abuse his power, but even the well-meaning missionary.

11. *Hiring nationals to do our missionary work gives the impression that the spread of the gospel depends on money*. Davis' allegation, mentioned above, that Westerners are under the influence of a philosophy of "economic determinism" is perhaps truer than ever. Is the growth of the church, the spread of the gospel, the fulfillment of the Great Commission, finally dependent upon the church's ability to raise money so that workers can be hired? Certainly financial resources can facilitate the propagation of the gospel, but, as Craig Ott has said:

> Making the fulfillment of the Great Commission dependent on the church's ability to raise money is a fallacy Western Christians have uncritically, unconsciously accepted. It reflects our Western materialism and commitment to a professionalized ministry. Again, this theoretically limits God's work to the measure of the church's economic prosperity.[17]

Conclusion

Before embarking upon plans to hire national "missionaries," it is crucial that one count the costs, weigh the evidence from past history, and carefully think through the ramifications for the spread of the gospel. What John Nevius and his colleagues advocated in those simple articles of 115 years ago seems uncannily contemporary, for the principle of not allowing pecuniary gain to hinder or distort the message of the gospel still applies today, as it did then, and as it did 2000 years ago. Moreover, dare we lose sight of the fact that the greatest gift we have to give as a church, and the most important and effective means of testimony, is when the message of the gospel is incarnated in flesh

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[16] See Kornfield, William J. "What Hath our Western Money and our Western Gospel Wrought?" in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, July 1991, pp. 230-236. Kornfield begins his article: "Increasing financial paternalism and the accompanying Westernization of the gospel are the two most critical issues facing us in world missions today." His concern is the way in which Western use of money is adversely affecting the development of churches that are responsive to their own environment.

[17] Ott, Craig. "Let the Buyer Beware," in *The Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, July 1993, p. 267.

and blood? We must focus on being a *sending church*, that is, a church that sends her sons and daughters, not merely money. Think of how Jesus put it when he gave the commission to his little band of followers, "*Go*, and make disciples . . ." (Matthew 28:19). "As the Father has sent me, so *I am sending you*" (John 20:21) ". . . and *you will be my witnesses* in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Bruce Hunt, a missionary to Korea, wrote in 1958 concerning the issue of how the hiring of national "missionaries" can impede the extension of the gospel, or, put positively, how keeping the spread of the gospel independent from outside financial resources has promoted the growth and health of the church: "Yet too often it seems that zeal has gone ahead of knowledge and the old mistakes were not only repeated in new fields but, in the name of Christian love and relief, some of these mistakes are being greatly magnified and much solid work is being sorely handicapped by a philanthropy that pauperizes and makes its converts weak and dependent."[18]

There may be some ways in which true partnerships can be worked out, and perhaps someday there will be a truly international Lutheran missionary movement, in which all the participants are truly equals, in which manipulation by those who hold the purse strings is not practiced, in which proper accountability systems are able to function, and through which all participating churches are able to realize their potential, rights and privileges of bearing witness to all the world of the power of the gospel. In the meantime, however, it will be exceedingly important to exercise wisdom and caution, lest unwittingly the gospel be compromised, and we think that it is possible to fulfill our responsibility to "go," to be "sent," and to bear witness to "the ends of the earth," by hiring others to do so for us.[19]

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[18] Hunt, Bruce F. "Preface to the 4th Edition," in Nevius, n.p.

[19] May the following words, spoken more humbly and clearly over 100 years ago than I can do on my own, serve to convey the attitude with which I have approached the important assignment of writing on this topic: "I wish further to disclaim all assumption of ability to speak authoritatively on this subject, as though I had myself reached its final solution. The effect of long experience in mission work has been in my case to deepen a sense of incompetence, and to excite wonder in remembering the inconsiderate rashness and self-dependency of a quarter of a century ago. Still, though we may not feel competent to give advice, we may at least give a word of warning. Though we may not have learned what to do in certain cases and under certain circumstances, is it not much to have learned what not to do, and to tread cautiously where we do not know the way, and to regard with hesitation and suspicion any preconceived opinion which we know to be of doubtful expediency, especially if it is unauthorized by Scripture teaching and example?" Nevius rightly claimed that the best, most well-conceived methods cannot eliminate the problems in mission work that come from the world, the flesh and Satan; however, ill-conceived methods may multiply and intensify those problems, and cause unnecessary harm to the proclamation of the gospel. Nevius, p. 10.

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