

# POSTINGS

*articles for missions mobilizers*



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## Supporting Indigenous Workers

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to the global  
missions task force

Take this short true/false test to evaluate your understanding of Western churches' partnerships with indigenous workers.

T/F Western churches should support indigenous pastors if their congregation is too poor to pay their salary.

T/F Western churches can be an indigenous partner's sending congregation if they don't have one with a missionary vision.

T/F For a strong personal relationship, Western churches should build partnerships directly with the indigenous worker rather than the national organization under which they serve.

T/F Western church partners should pay for an indigenous partner to visit them.

T/F Western churches should send support funds directly to an indigenous partner because wiring money is easy and eliminates the “middleman.”

With great care, healthy direct partnerships between Western churches and indigenous work/workers are certainly possible. However, the long-term impacts are far-reaching and highly complex. Unfortunately, some churches have discovered too late that their generosity has actually impeded ministry instead of furthering it.

For a host of reasons, none of the above questions has a simple true/false answer. Here are 10 guidelines followed by explanations that begin to unpack these issues and provide some warnings that could help your church avoid painful mistakes.

#### QUICK LINKS:

- + Avoid creating dependent pastors and stalled multiplication
- + Consider supporting the organization instead of an individual missionary
- + Require solid, local accountability
- + Examine the local organization
- + Research financial integrity
- + Get advice from others on the ground
- + Plan for quality communication and visits
- + Understand the complexities of international funding
- + Develop and maintain a three-way partnership
- + Practice discernment about special financial gifts

### Avoid creating dependent pastors and stalled multiplication

Supporting an indigenous pastor involves some different issues than supporting an indigenous missionary or ministry organization. We will address the support of a pastor first.

### Almost 100 years ago, a movement to Christ was being birthed in southern Ethiopia among those from tribal religions.

When one group of believers needed a meeting place, the Western missionaries working with them contributed funds to build a church. However, when word got back to mission leaders in the capital that the church building had been constructed with mission funds, they insisted that the structure be torn down. The growth of this emerging indigenous church was not to be hampered by making believers dependent on foreign funds! It was a bitter pill to swallow at the time, but the church was torn down and the local believers were required to fund the church’s construction themselves. Today this denomination has over 10 million baptized believers meeting in over 15,000 local churches. This would never have happened had the missionaries created dependence on Western funds for church buildings. *Recounted by Terry Wiley, AIM International*

*While this illustration relates to buildings rather than salaries, the principle applies to both. Even the best-intentioned funding has the potential to create dependency. Watch the [Handful of Rice](#) video as an illustration of how even “the poorest of the poor” can give.*

Poverty tugs at the hearts of Western Christians, especially when they find out how a small sum of monthly support can fund a pastor’s salary in much of the world. How could such generosity be wrong?

In many cases, underwriting the pastor's salary is presented as a short-term solution until the congregation grows to sufficient size to underwrite their salary. However, in many cases paying a pastor's salary never becomes possible for the local church, and seldom can Western-supported pastors convince their congregations to give sacrificially (why should they if it is obvious that rich Westerners can support them?)

Western support also creates fertile ground for jealousy from other pastors who are not "blessed" with such funding, and it convinces potential church planters that they can establish new congregations only if they can convince Western sources to pay their salaries. The result is stunted growth and stalled multiplication.

Does that mean Western churches should turn their backs on indigenous pastors and church planters? No. The practical answer lies in the fact that the vast majority of churches across the Global South are pastored by bivocational leaders. Pastors support themselves and their families by part- or full-time employment. It works! However, becoming self-sustaining may be challenging.

How can Western churches help to facilitate this model? Instead of taking on the support of a pastor, they can encourage entrepreneurs in their congregation to walk alongside an indigenous worker to determine a viable business for their context, fund training if needed, and guide in developing and implementing a business plan. The pastor will be more respected in the community if he is not funded from a "hidden" source, and the Western partner may be able to help multiple pastors become self-sustaining. This solution is not a simple panacea, but the model works. See example on right.

### Consider supporting the organization instead of an individual missionary

There are many indigenous workers who function in a missionary role rather than as a pastor. Isn't it legitimate to support them just like Western churches support workers being sent by their own church?

### BEE World's purpose is to train pastors around the globe, but recently they have tackled the issue of their training ministry's unhealthy dependence on ongoing Western funding.

The first step was to work with their in-country leaders to leverage the most conducive business and economic strategies that will support training and ministry long term.

"Addressing pastors' economic struggles brings them a sense of hope—they feel loved and valued," says **President Dave Semmelbeck**.

Since many pastors in Africa farm for their survival, one option **BEE World** has explored is a collaborative effort with **Foundations for Farming**. BEE World covered the costs for several leaders to attend training in a neighboring country that included best agricultural practices as well as biblical principles that apply to farming. When asked after the training if they could implement some of what they learned, one pastor/farmer replied, "This will change everything!"

Individualized missionary support has been around since the dawn of modern missions, and while there are some benefits, the drawbacks are many. Largely because it is an easier way to raise funds from the West, the individual support model with its inherent flaws is frequently being adopted by indigenous workers and non-Western organizations.

Let's think before making this funding choice. Here are three reasons to consider supporting the indigenous organization rather than an individual worker:

First of all, supporting an organization rather than an individual gives the local leaders' options for spending their resources in the best possible way. With individualized support, a worker may be accepted and retained primarily because they can raise funds (often due to their facility in English), rather than because they have the strongest Christian character or the best skill set for the needed role. Funding the ministry organization instead allows godly leaders to steward resources and people for maximum impact and with greater flexibility as the context changes.

Second, supporting the organization avoids the problem of individuals sidestepping accountability to local leadership because their funding comes from the other side of the world. Financial "independence" can also create inequities and jealousy among staff.

Third, supporting the indigenous organization rather than the missionary leaves the responsibility to raise up, support, and care for workers primarily in the lap of indigenous congregations where it belongs. Western churches never want to remove the motivation for workers to depend on strong ties to a local church or sending body. As one aspect of their partnership with an indigenous organization, Western churches can look for ways to help them strengthen the missions vision and sending functions of local congregations.

With these advantages in mind, before supporting an individual indigenous worker, churches are wise to stop and ask whether contributing the same amount of funding to the indigenous organization to use at its discretion would have greater benefits and demonstrate respect for the local leadership God has raised up.

After considering these factors, if the Western church determines it still wants to pursue the possibility of supporting an indigenous worker, they need to carefully research the function of this person's agency/ministry and compare expectations before making a final decision.

## Require solid, local accountability

Missions is littered with situations where Western churches have naively invested in an individual worker who had no onsite accountability and discovered eventually (or worse, never knew) that there were serious abuses of their trust. Misuse of finances may be the most common failure, but partners have also hidden severe family problems, abuse of staff, neglect of duties, etc.

Glowing ministry reports can be fabricated, and sometimes churches naively assume that an indigenous worker is automatically above reproach. Yes, there are totally independent indigenous missionaries serving faithfully, but even the Apostle Paul as a pioneer missionary was accountable to his sending church that knew him well, and he returned to give them a full report of how he fulfilled their goals (Acts 14:26-28). When soliciting and delivering funds for the believers in Jerusalem, he made sure that there were multiple persons involved to assure that monies were disbursed in a way that honored the Lord (2 Cor. 8:19-21).

The same should apply to workers wherever they serve. Beware if the worker tells you that they do not need local accountability or there is none available. There are always options for serving within some kind of structure that can provide accountability.

Regardless of whether you anticipate supporting an individual member or the indigenous organization as a whole, careful study and interaction is critical.

## Examine the local organization

Local accountability is only as good as the integrity and track record of the local ministry. Measuring the quality of leadership and ministry is almost impossible to do well without on-site visits. Asking questions from a distance tends to provide inadequate answers and can launch a relationship built on misunderstandings.

Get to know the organization's history, doctrine, and leaders. Find out how many of the decision makers are

## All of our partnerships with indigenous workers came out of connections we had through our sent workers.

In most cases, the sent worker was in some kind of collaborative relationship with the national and then recommended them to us for further partnership. None of our partnerships happened until I and other key leaders here at Grace had multiple face-to-face visits with them.

*Don Beacham, Cross-Cultural Outreach Pastor, Grace Community Church, Arlington, TX*

family members. Family-run organizations are common in the Majority World, almost always undercutting accountability. Is there a functioning, independent governing board? Talk to some board members.

Find out how the organization builds the ministry capacity of its members and how it provides member care. Your church may be able to expand the organization's capacity for both, but you want to be sure that they have a serious commitment to the spiritual/physical/emotional/mental flourishing of their workers and their families.

### Research financial integrity

**Unapologetically ask questions about finances.** If you are going to be good stewards of your church's God-given resources, you want to make sure that there is fiscal responsibility throughout the organization.

- What is their financial health? Can you see financial reports?
- Are there regular financial audits? If not, are there other ways to confirm that the records are

complete and practices are in compliance with all legal requirements in that country and meet your country's requirements for financial reporting?

- Does the organization receive some financial support from within their own nation? Christians even in the poorest countries have some capacity to give.

**Talk with leaders about how individual missionary support fits into the overall financial plan for the organization.**

- Are all workers individually supported?
- Are those with support from the West remunerated differently than workers funded entirely in-country?
- Will an administrative deduction be taken from the support monies your church provides? If so, how much?

**Individual support raises other questions.**

- What percentage of this person's needed funds will your gift provide?
- Where will the remainder come from?
- Is this worker going to need additional monies for things like some mode of transportation or children's education?
- How are ministry expenses covered?
- Will your potential giving create dependency on these funds, or is there a plan for these monies to be replaced by other income in the future?
- Are there ways that your church could help develop indigenous income streams to cover this support or at least a portion of it?
- How would your support for this worker impact the attitude of others in the organization who don't have such support?
- Will Western funding give this individual an unwise amount of influence? This factor is particularly important if the worker is a younger adult working in a culture where leadership is based on age.

## Get advice from others on the ground

If possible, ask a seasoned missionary or local leader with experience in cross-cultural dialog to help you get candid feedback in discerning the potential of a partnership. Keep in mind though that in many cultures, honest assessments are seldom stated directly, especially not to visitors. But increasingly there are mature indigenous leaders, networks, and institutions where you can get the feedback you need.

### When we are vetting a potential partner, we look to see if they are networking with other ministries.

We aren't interested in supporting someone or something that is siloed. Whether they are territorial or "play well with others" is really important to us. *Trusha Barner, Missions Director, First Presbyterian Church of Bonita Springs, FL*

## Plan for quality communication and visits

Do you and your potential indigenous partner and their organization understand and agree on expectations for ongoing communication, both in terms of emails/videos/Zoom calls for overall information as well as timely responses to individual emails between your potential partner and your missions team or missions pastor?

What is the worker's level of proficiency in English (or whatever language is used in your church)? Is this adequate for maintaining communication with your congregation or will there need to be a translator involved for written or verbal communication? If so, who will provide this person and are they available as needed? Is there a charge for their services?

Face-to-face visits by your indigenous partner to your church can greatly strengthen relationships. However, be aware that there could be unintended impact on the worker, especially if they are less mature and/or come from a much lower economic context. Lifestyle disparities can open the door for higher funding expectations, clandestine requests to individuals for money, and dissatisfaction with their lifestyle back home. For some, this creates a determination to relocate to the West. Discuss these factors carefully with organizational leaders and perhaps directly with your indigenous partner before arranging visits.

## Understand the complexities of international funding

Make sure that you understand the implications of sending funds directly overseas. By far the most preferred option is to send monies to the organization's office in your country. If this is a US entity, you will want to check if they are members of ECFA.

If funds must be sent to an overseas office, understand that many Western governments have requirements about reporting such contributions, especially if donors have been issued tax-deductible receipts. Discuss the implications with your church's accountant and auditors before making a decision to directly fund a worker or organization overseas.

## Develop and maintain a three-way partnership

If your support is designated for an individual worker, your church will need to be proactive to collaborate with the overseeing organization. Ask for regular reports; talk to a supervisor or organizational leader at least annually and more often if there are concerns or additional ways in which you could make the worker more effective. When you visit your worker on site, make time to connect with their organizational leaders as well.

Look for ways to contribute to the overall health and impact of the whole organization. Is there expertise in your church that could help them to function better? Are there ways to encourage and support the leadership?

## Practice discernment about special financial gifts

When visiting or being visited by your indigenous worker, they may make personal or ministry requests to the church or to individuals. Even though it may feel awkward, you will need to discuss your guidelines regarding personal or ministry requests ahead of time. It is usually wise to graciously but clearly let the worker know that they must channel all requests for personal financial gifts or special requests (such as sponsoring their child for education in your country) through your missions team.

This article has focused on the growing practice of Western churches to directly partner with indigenous work/workers. Due to space constraints, we have not been able to address the option of supporting indigenous workers through a Western agency. Smaller or less experienced churches may find this a workable solution so long as they choose a partner agency that can demonstrate how their funding practices involve local accountability and avoid creating dependency.

These brief suggestions only begin to address the very complicated issues around dependence, sustainability, accountability, and partnership. To delve more deeply into these complex questions, we recommend beginning with:

- *Cross-Cultural Partnerships: Navigating the Complexities of Money and Mission* by Mary T. Lederleitner
- *Building Strategic Relationships* by Daniel Rickett
- *Toxic Charity: How churches and charities hurt those they help* by Robert D. Lupton
- *African Friends and Money Matters* by David Maranz

Meanwhile, we hope you found these guidelines helpful in unpacking some of the questions related to supporting indigenous pastors or missionaries such as those posed in the true/false questions at the beginning of this article. Yes, the issues may be more complex than you initially thought. But bigger-picture thinking, personal dialog with onsite leaders, and wise planning can help your church support the global missions force wisely and respectfully.

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