

Affluence in AWM—Is Bonk Right?

by Don Little

Editor's note: This is more than a book review as the author goes on to discuss the ideas in the book in relation to the ministry of AWM workers in the Arab world.

In his 1991 book, *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem*, Jonathan Bonk presents a hard-hitting analysis and critique of the almost overwhelming negative and usually destructive impact that Western missionary affluence has on the poor among whom most such missionaries minister.¹ In the first three chapters, which make up Part I, Bonk argues that the *sense of entitlement* with which Western missionaries regard their personal material and economic advantage goes back to the beginnings of the modern missionary era. In fact, it is so deeply embedded that it is at the core – often unconsciously – of missionary thinking, strategy and policy. In Part II (Chapters 4- 6), Bonk lays out some of the often unforeseen, yet profoundly negative consequences of this growing Western missionary affluence. He describes some of the primary damage that this affluence does to relationships and communication, and describes how it often causes massive failure in ministry. In his concluding chapter, Bonk makes some helpful suggestions as to how individual missionaries and Western mission agencies can find their way ‘out of the mire of personal affluence’.²

The destructive impact of our relative affluence as Western missionaries was brought home to me recently as I

struggled to know how to respond to a friend and former disciple who wrote an email to me from North Africa, asking for financial assistance in his current desperate situation. My unwillingness to help this friend, whom I have not seen for about five years, elicited an angry and resentful response in which my friend called into question my integrity as a disciple of Christ.

As I read Bonk's penetrating analysis and at times almost scathing critique³, my responses ranged from conviction of my own sinful behaviour, to outrage at the ‘ridiculous’ exaggerations that Bonk seemed tempted to make.⁴ Bonk strikes close to home and writes as a missionary insider familiar with the temptations and challenges of missionary affluence. Indeed, as many of my colleagues will affirm, dealing with the psychological stress of being *relatively well off* and ministering among people who are often so much poorer in material possessions than we are, was for me one of the abiding stresses and challenges of living in North Africa. Added to the stress of feeling uncomfortably wealthy while living in North Africa was the stress of coming home for furlough visits to Canada and feeling distinctly poor by comparison to our friends and supporters. Questions of affluence and poverty and missionary lifestyle have continued to trouble me ever since I spent two years sleeping on a bedroll on the floor with OM in India while surviving on less

than \$100 a month in order to live at the level of the people among whom we ministered.

My own solution while living in North Africa was to seek to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in being as generous in giving to those who asked for help as I possibly could, given my modest degree of *comparative* affluence. A number of times, we secretly gave away significant amounts of money to help friends pay their rent, or pay off debts, or pay for medical bills, etc. At times, this generosity was quite costly to us, restricting our family holidays and preventing us from buying more possessions and typical 'middle class' accretions. However, our generosity gave us credibility.

A few MBB friends explained that they did not mind seeing people with more money than they had. They acknowledged that life was like that. It hurt them *only* when those same people preached about generosity but were not willing to part with *a lot* of their abundance in order to help meet the needs of the needy around them. Living and ministering in North Africa was a constant personal challenge to live up to Christ's discipleship demands in terms of one's possessions. There was no question but that one's attitude towards one's affluence, and resultant actions, had a strong correlation to ministry fruitfulness.

What about those of us serving as church-planting tent-makers in AWM in general? Are we living at a level of affluence that interferes with our capacity to minister to those around us who are poor? This question is

impossible to answer in a general way. There are such huge variations in relative lifestyles among our tent-makers and among the cities in which they live. Those who live in some of the Arabian Peninsula countries live quite well from the income that their local occupations provide. Nevertheless, they are considerably poorer than most of the local people among whom they are seeking to minister. Indeed, the major spiritual stronghold in those regions appears to be materialism, rather than Islam. The lifestyle challenges of our workers in such areas are considerably different from those of us who live in poorer Middle Eastern and North African countries.

On one hand, our generation of workers in North Africa is saved from some of the typical excesses of missionary affluence simply by the fact of being tent-makers. Our lifestyle choices are often matched to reflect others in our professions. We are not seen, in general, as missionaries, but as Westerners living and working in North Africa. The era of compounds and missionaries living much above their neighbours has long been outdated in North Africa – if for no other reason than that the governments in the region do not welcome missionaries. In this sense, Bonk's criticisms of missionary affluence do not generally apply to us.

On the other hand, so much of what he says has an ongoing relevance to our ministry of discipling and church planting in the poorer countries of the Arab world. For example, we are actively seeking to recruit new mem-

bers into our teams from the new sending countries. There is no doubt that the majority of these co-workers will be coming with economic backgrounds vastly different from those of us who come from affluent Western countries. We are discussing how to mesh such people into our team. There will be very significant challenges in doing so. Again, tent-making will be a leveller in that in several countries, AWM members will be living entirely on their in-country incomes through their professional placements. This will mean that economic disparity will be related to professional rather than national background. Nevertheless, Bonk's concern about the normal inequalities between Western and non-Western missionaries must be carefully heeded. His quotation from a Japanese missionary in Thailand is a sobering rebuke and a warning to treat these issues with utmost care and seriousness:

The gap between us was immense in all areas of life. We tried not to compare ourselves with the 'first class', and tried our best, but how could we avoid this comparison? We were living right among them day after day! Once my family was virtually broke... for one week. I finally went to seek 'help' (of 'first-aid-kit' kind) at the office of the 'first class'. I was given a sermon – a good sermon – there. As I came out of that office, feeling like a third class passenger sneaking out of a first class cabin, I met a fellow Western missionary with whom I had studied at the same seminary in the United States, as he drove up in his Volkswagen loaded with items of shopping. He had only been in Thailand a few

weeks. Our most 'irritating' problem was our most esteemed Western missionaries!⁵

Moving beyond this issue, the central concern about the negative impact of our Western missionary relative influence has to do with the relationships that we build with the members of the national churches that we are seeking to encourage and strengthen. Bonk cites numerous cases of the work of missionaries being almost totally undermined because of their easy affluence and their often crass insensitivity to the impact that that affluence has on national workers who must subsist at a much lower lifestyle. Bonk makes several statements that are often chillingly true, and apply even to our ministry in AWM. It is worth taking the time to quote them:

1. Wealthy missionaries cannot identify with the life situations of the poor which their message is intended to address. Inability to relate the good news to the actual circumstances of the people except in theory raises serious questions as to the validity of the good news itself.

2. There does not seem to be a correspondence between what wealthy missionaries preach and what they themselves practice... Western missionary claims of personal sacrifice and privation – however genuine in the context of their pecuniary potential in their own society – can only be greeted with incredulity by the great majority of the world's peoples, many of whom would be rich by local standards if they could but trade places with the missionary for a year, a week, or even a day.

3. The gospel of plenty, preached so eloquently and persuasively in the

silent language of missionary lifestyle, frequently overrides or distorts people's understanding of the Christian gospel.... It is only recently that Western missionaries have discovered, to their chagrin, that the movement of which they are a part has been credited with being one of the greatest secularizing agencies of the past two centuries.⁶

Numerous times during our sojourn in North Africa, relations between missionaries and disciples were strained because of issues arising out of our relative affluence and perceived lack of generosity. Some seasoned co-workers, having struggled with needy brothers and sisters asking for help, and seeing monetary issues cause division in local fellowships, gave it out as a general principle that one should be very cautious about ever giving money to people who ask for help. Others, fortunately, took a different approach and gave away so much, so often, that they themselves were virtually reduced to poverty. I was close enough to the pulse of the hearts of my North African friends to know which missionaries they loved and respected the most!

These issues will not go away and there are no easy solutions. However, once again Bonk comes to our aid in suggesting that we must always work to ensure that our mission work is grounded in three central truths arising out of the very nature of the Gospel. Since we minister incarnationally, we must live among the people we serve and strive to live as close to them in lifestyle and attitude towards affluence as possible, as we call them to emulate everything about us as fellow

disciples. They cannot copy what they do not see. Secondly, we are called to model a lifestyle of sacrifice as we bear the cross of Christ in our daily lives. Finally, we are called to minister in weakness, not in strength. It will be as we seek to know the Holy Spirit's empowerment to live out the reality of these central Gospel truths that we will find our way to lifestyles that are free of the love of Mammon, lives which can truly reflect the call of Christ among those we are called to love and serve.⁷ May we in AWM continue to find grace to be radical disciples in the wide variety of contexts into which we are called to *live lives of witness*.⁸

Footnotes

1 Jonathan J. Bonk, *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

2 Ibid., p. xx. This summary of the book is partly an adaptation of Bonk's own summary in his introduction, p. xx, and partly my own summary of the book's contents.

3 For example: 'The narrow path of discipleship has never been popular among those whose numerous and bulky possessions make passage through the narrow gate and negotiation of the narrow way impossible. It has always been easier for a poor man than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven – in spite of the fact that the rich man with his M.Div. and his Kittel's is well prepared and splendidly equipped to speculate and articulate on eternal verities.' Ibid., p. 112.

4 For example: 'To borrow Trevor Verry's apt metaphor, "[the Western missionary] cannot help but carry something of [the West's] atmosphere with him, like the smell of stale cigarettes clinging to the clothes of a non-smoker who has been in a room full of people smoking"', p. 114.

5 Ibid., p. 55. Quoted by Bonk from *Missionary Service in Asia Today. A Report on a Consultation*

Seedbed XX No. 1

Held by the Asia Methodist Advisory Committee,
February 18-23, 1971, p. 132.

6 Ibid., pp 61, 64, 66 & 68.

7 Ibid., pp. 115-122.

8 This slogan currently appears on most of the
publicity produced by AWM in the USA. May
we truly learn to live up to that high calling.