

Reflections on Finance and Ministry

By Oum Mark

The example is given: *A church in Houston is linked with a church in Amman so that the church in Amman has financial resources to dedicate some of its members to Arab world mission.*

There was a time when missionary energy was dedicated primarily to the task of preaching the Gospel, discipling new believers and seeing churches established. However, a new wave has hit Morocco in recent years: many companies have concentrated their energies on 'recruiting national Christians'. Regrettably, this has become the latest 'fashionable ministry', and it has permeated the national church. As soon as a strong believer emerges, it is not long before he is 'hired'. In recent years, some who left to study theology abroad were promised by foreign agencies that upon their return they would be given a job as a missionary.

We have wrestled through these issues in our country over a number of years. More recently, we have thought even more about them because of all the brainstorming that is going on in connection with the five-year strategic plans. I feel concerned about the general direction things are going, not only in our company, but also in others.

Some questions need answers:

- Is getting involved with money issues a healthy way to go?
- Is it a matter of right or wrong?
- Is it a matter of principle?
- Is it legitimate for a church to seek money from a mission?

Normally the church enables missions financially in order to achieve the church's vision in reaching the world — and this is the biblical pattern. However, we should inspire and enable in ways that are responsible, taking a biblical, long-term approach. We need to think things through carefully and count the cost. We *do* need to weigh things up.

In this article, we want to paint a picture of what is happening in the country where we minister. I testify, as far as I see and understand the situation here, that the following is painfully true. Let us learn from history. Let us see what has happened when others have made the choices we are now considering.

Money, the Root Problem

The Moroccan church is struggling, weak and vulnerable, and this is primarily due to a lot of mistrust. Being myself from an Arab background, I can say that for the Arab world, both culturally and generally, money is a very strong temptation. Most people are extremely affected by money. Principles are easily compromised, and money is the main source of arguments in families, between partners and in marriages. Sadly, the Christian community is not exempt from this problem. In fact, money is the main reason for disagreement

among believers—more so, even, than denominational differences.

Commitment to Local Church Compromised

Most married Christian national couples that I know of here in my city are employed and financed by an outside agency. Out of eleven couples, there are only two exceptions. And, sadly, *none* of these couples have stayed with their 'home church', nor do they work under the umbrella of the local church.

We have seen several people who were involved in church building until a Christian company employed them, and then things were spoiled. Finance was the main spoiling ingredient, and their relationships with other believers are now considerably strained.

Most of those who are involved with outside companies have started their own church group; whether they are qualified, gifted or called to do so or not, does not matter! You might say that this is positive. Yes, it could be, but most have bad relationships with other church groups and are influenced by their dedication to their supporting company and their church group. Why? Because **they started without a biblical base** and because **there are too many masters** to please. The church thinks *very* differently from outside companies about what should be done.

Shopping for 'Christian Employment'

Tragically, many have fallen out with their churches and then looked for a company that would 'employ' them. And it did not take long! In fact, there is ample choice. To my knowledge,

companies do not take adequate care in investigating believers' testimonies in their communities. Should we not stop and think about the example this gives to new believers who are unemployed?

Building Biblical Models

Every time a company recruits an individual, he or she is separated from his church. How can this help to build the church? Most of these people have never experienced a good example of what a church should be. What are they going to reproduce? It is frightening to meditate on that.

A Calling, Not a Job

We frequently hear some nationals put down the church and disrespect its authority. Their commitment is to whoever pays them. '*Mission*' is a *foreign concept*. For many believers, mission has become a cash dispenser. We need to impart love for God's glory through mission, not entice their interest in financial matters. You cannot build a church without love, but you can build one without money. They really do not think of it as a means to an end, but rather as a refuge from their reality and as a job opportunity. They come to Christ and, before too long, companies 'fish' them, and they are transformed into individuals who no longer fit into their entourage.

'Whenever there is something to do for the glory of the Lord, any witness, any ministry, even a person to follow up, you get paid for it.' (These were the words of a 'leading' national brother.) There is hardly any attention paid to God's will or his calling and no talk of a

burden for the lost; these values that arm the servant of God now take second place. This is the reality, but the nationals are not to blame. Concepts such as these come after years of growth and discipleship and as a gift from God. But companies are racing ahead of him.

Modelling

Sacrificial Giving and Living

There is a phenomenon that we have seen to be very true in this country: those who always receive help, those who are always transported to church, those who are always given the bus fare, and who are not taught to give sacrificially at the very beginning of their Christian walk, will always receive and never learn about giving. **If we teach a church that outside help is indispensable for things to be done, we can only expect it to reproduce more churches like itself.** The questions to be asked are:

- Is the fact that they are doing good things of primary importance here?
- Are we not being distracted from the essentials?
- Is this the model we are talking about in our purpose statement?

Remember the Arab saying: *Faqed el shay la youatih*. ('If you haven't got it, you can't give it.') Church life cannot be taught as a theory. It must be lived until it becomes a part of your understanding and the very basis of your life.

I remember clearly the first time I heard a non-believer accusing us of paying people to become Christians! I was enraged and shocked. Today, I say with pain that I am afraid that this is

exactly the way it is perceived by some Christians who are still weak in their faith. For me, it is no longer a rumour but a reality. Some have recently professed faith in Christ in hope of a job. Others have come out of Christian fellowship when someone else received money and an employment, and they did not! How will a new believer, who comes from a very needy family, learn to give sacrificially rather than receive, if his or her church receives help from the outside? How will he feel unity with others in his church group when he has to economize for days to be able to come to church while his church leader sits at home most of the time and has a car and a house full of things that he can never dream of having? How will he be encouraged to give when his church is receiving dollars or euros?

Some say that the negatives that result from giving churches financial support are just a small sacrifice compared to the benefits.

- **Is this really a small sacrifice to make?**
- And are we the ones who have the right to make this kind of sacrifice?
- What kind of churches do we want to produce?
- Is this a good testimony?
- Is giving not commended any more? When the widow gave her small coin, which was all that she had, Jesus commended her for her giving. There is joy in giving, and we should do nothing to deprive young believers of this biblical principle.
- Are we motivated by what is biblically right or by the pressures put upon us by churches or individuals?

The Danger of Building a Foundation of Dependency

We recently had a conversation with a leader of the most active church in our country. This church is sending people to different cities, but the church itself is receiving money from abroad. They are following the example of a certain large Middle Eastern church that receives help from the West. He disagrees with individuals being paid directly from foreign agencies. However, this dependency on western financing does not help the church grow in responsibility and sets wrong precedents throughout the country. Is it right for the church to be built on such a foundation? This question applies to the church in the *whole* of the Arab world.

The Myth of the Poor Arab Church

Is there a shortage of money?? No, there is *not!* Unfortunately, the influence of Middle Eastern churches on Morocco is more negative than positive. The fact of the matter is that without learning to sacrifice and obey—even to suffer—godly churches will not be produced. Church should not become a meal ticket. Church should be what Christ wants it to be: giving and humble. Would you like your home church in the West to be dependent on a foreign mission? What would happen? People who come out from a church that is always on the receiving end will only plant receiving churches. I hope that it is not our wish to replicate more churches of this kind.

Ministering in Step with the Local Church?

Money tends to drive these churches to go beyond their level of experience and maturity in their ministry. They attempt things that need greater maturity more than money. **What is worrying is their preoccupation with money to the point that God's calling is in danger of being overlooked or even forgotten.**

Encourage

What is Already Happening

Growing up, as I did, in the Middle East, and witnessing God's blessings—including some MBBs who came to Christ without the pollution of money—I know that no established church needs material help to reach the world. Due to the severe political restrictions, you may not have heard about what happens in some parts of the Middle East. But the Lord is using his church in these places. It may, perhaps, be on a small scale, but it is in a pure and encouraging way. In my growing-up years, I saw people come to Christ from Muslim backgrounds. Those who worked among them did so sacrificially, with love and vision. I hope that our company can play a role in encouraging Christians to reach out to Muslims and keep to that worthy goal!

How We Can Help the Church

What worries me is that we are making a strategic plan to help churches find money from the outside or to link churches together for that purpose. Could I suggest a slight change to this

phrase? Can we make our strategic plan to **help churches find money from within their own resources?** God promises to bless. He can, if we give him a chance to demonstrate his loving care and his faithfulness without all the disadvantages and the problems that money from the outside is causing. We are not against western churches being generous and giving gifts that the Lord leads them to give. What we are against is building the mindset that says *'I need someone to give to me in order that I may serve God,'* or *'If someone has more than I do, then it is their money that needs to be spent, not mine,'* or *'I need to be rewarded for serving Christ.'* The thought that has invaded many places in the world we work in, and which so much resembles their former faith, is that **'If I do something for God, I deserve pay.'**

When I came here, I left behind a much better style of living than the one I obtained. It was a difficult adaptation for me, but had I not gone through that tough time, I would not still be here. In fact, it was a great gift from God and an opportunity for me to learn more about the depth of His loving care and about where my heart should be. Are we, as a company, robbing people of that kind of spiritual growth by being distracted by finance?

Finally

Answers to these questions are difficult, but if God's glory is our motivation, our

goal and our *raison d'être*, then the principles found in God's Word will be our light and guide. What action steps can any of the readers suggest? Here are my suggestions:

- Create ways in which we can encourage the national church to feel and be more responsible spiritually and financially.
- Work alongside the church we are aiming to establish, implanting vision and love for the lost, while we disciple people out of their present attitudes and concepts of Christian service. Find practical ways to spread a spirit of humbly giving back the talents that **God** has given, focusing on returning them to Him, not to a particular mission agency.
- Encourage the growth of the church by encouraging believers to be more committed and submissive, in the Lord, to its authority. I believe it is harmful to remove active members out of churches to serve in missions!
- Identify clearly God's calling and motivation, starting with ourselves, taking Jesus' example who ***'made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant'*** (Phil 2:7). We should have a clear and well-thought procedure in recruitment.
- Never put the need of the mission before the needs of the church. Normally we should be working hand in hand and moving in the same direction.