

The Task of Effective Relationships

by S.B.

Our life and ministry involves us in many different types of **relationships**. Building relationships is a key part of our ministry. Unfortunately, these relationships are not always easy to understand due to cultural, spiritual, and personal differences that we face. This lack of understanding can lead to conflict and ineffectiveness in our ability to carry out the ministry we are called to.

Conflict between individuals happens quite frequently in the country where we live. It ranges from disagreements between kids on the street to our elderly maid who has decided to move out of her son's home because of the intense conflict with her daughter-in-law. All conflict can bring stress and hurt into our lives, but none more than that which occurs between believers. A conflict that I found myself in the middle of recently served to clarify what I had heard, and to a small degree confirmed through observation, about relationships in this country. It was probably like many other conflicts that have occurred throughout the history of the emerging church here. But one issue in particular was raised that caused me to think in a different light about my role as a foreigner working with national believers. Since this incident I have seen this dynamic played out in other personal relationships of mine and of other foreigners with nationals.

Case Study

I had been meeting together with a group of five Muslim-background believers for about a year and a half when two other believers were invited to join us. One of them, "Mohammed", had been involved for a number of years with a group in another city. He had been working in our city for about a year but had only joined us in our meetings two or three times because on the weekends he would travel to meet with the believers in his home city. Then he decided he wanted to focus on ministry and be committed to the body in our city.

The other brother, "Razeg", was originally from our city but three years previously had moved to another city to work. When he returned to our city and got to know me and two of the national believers, the group invited him to join us. Razeg and Mohammed lived in the same neighborhood, so I had introduced them to one another before they started to meet with the group. They had developed a good relationship.

Before meeting with the group Mohammed had had a cordial but not a close relationship with "Said" who was the most mature believer and the unofficial leader of the group meeting in my home. He was also the one with whom I had the closest relationship. Mohammed and Said had gotten to know each other through summer Bible schools and through occasional

visits that Said had made to Mohammed's city to meet with the believers there. Shortly after Mohammed had started meeting with the group, while I was sitting with him and Said in a cafe, he told Said that he had heard from other brothers that Said thinks he is better than everyone else and they resent his prideful attitude. Taken back by this, Said asked who had said this. Mohammed wouldn't give names. Said felt that if others had problems with him they needed to come to him and work it out. He decided to go around to all of the guys in the group and ask them if they felt this way about him. All of them denied it, leaving Said to conclude that Mohammed was lying. A couple of days later I was sitting with Razeg in a café, and he began to share with me how Mohammed had made some accusations about Said. Razeg, not having known either Mohammed or Said for a very long time, wasn't sure if the accusations were true but tended to believe Mohammed. I stopped him from sharing Mohammed's accusations and decided it was time we all get together to work this out. So, the next day all four of us met and began to work through some of the problems.

In the course of our discussions, Mohammed made a very interesting comment. He said that when a national has a close friendship, he doesn't want anyone else to get too close to that friend for fear that he will lose his friendship. He is threatened by others trying to build relationships with his friend and sees it as a competition to be won or lost. So, in order to keep others

from getting too close to his friend he tries to build himself up and tear others down.

This was the first time I had heard this dynamic expressed by a national. And both Said and Razeg nodded their heads, indicating by their look of realization and expressions that they agreed with Mohammed's perception, but had not been consciously aware of it until that point.

Analysis

As I walked away from that situation, still somewhat unresolved, I began to evaluate other relationships in light of Mohammed's comment. Later Said and I had a long discussion about it and specifically how it affects the national believers. I saw more clearly

Having a relationship with a foreigner brings both opportunity and status.

how important relationships are and that they are for the personal benefit of those involved. Having a relationship with a foreigner brings both opportunity and status. Within the church, apart from the possible material and status benefits, it is perceived that it may also lead to being chosen as the leader\teacher, a very prestigious position in this culture. Therefore, the foreigner becomes the center of the group's relationship focus. This had happened to me even though I had made strong attempts to have national-national relationships be the central focus.

Each one tries to be as close as possible to the foreigner, oftentimes

at the expense of relationships with national brothers. Over the past four years I have repeatedly seen this lead to others making accusations against the perceived "favored" one in the group. These are always made indirectly through a third party, like Mohammed had done concerning Said. The goal seems inevitably to be to influence the foreigner. This dynamic seems to be rooted deeply in the culture, as I have witnessed it on numerous occasions with my unbelieving friends as well.

In the task of church planting this dynamic needs to be very seriously considered. **Is this what has caused the splitting up of so many groups?** I have learned that many other foreigners have experienced this dynamic and haven't really been aware of the elements at play behind what is happening. One who has been working very closely with nationals for 15 years began sharing with me some things he was just now learning about his relationships with them. I realized that he was describing exactly the dynamic that Mohammed had described to me.

A number of factors contribute to this situation. The foundational problem would obviously lie in **unbiblical attitudes.** Scripture has a lot to say about attitudes and actions such as jealousy, pride, tearing others down, unforgiveness, lack of love and trust. Our teaching and prayer needs to center on these issues very early on with a goal to see biblical patterns develop in relationships.

Other **social factors** come from the relationship dynamics that nationals are raised with. Acceptance before God and others comes through doing the right things; by works and not grace. Much effort is made to be seen as honorable and significant in the eyes of others. Many times nationals have sung their praises of themselves to me and put down those around them. The powerful forces of shame and honor are the basis of this cultural dynamic. Relationships with, and acceptance by, a foreigner who has status in the culture gives the individual significance in the eyes of others. It is important, therefore, to have the foreigner's approval. A means for accomplishing this in the church is making oneself look good by conforming to "Christian" standards in the eyes of the foreigner and tearing others down by showing how they aren't conforming to those standards.

Along with this is the element of **trust, or lack of it,** between individuals. From infancy children are appeased by lies. We have often witnessed parents lying to their children to make them stop crying or causing a fuss. This lays a foundation of mistrust and also downplays the wrong of lying in order to obtain a justifiable end. Therefore deception and lying are viewed as justifiable to build oneself up in the eyes of the foreigner and tear others down.

Economic issues enter in as well. A large percentage of the churches here is made up of young single men and women, many of whom are unem-

played. Relationship with a foreigner provides a possible opportunity for employment and/or financial and material benefits. In a society with high unemployment and little hope for a good job, it is understandable that this is a strong factor.

Solutions

Are there **practical steps** we can take early on in our relationships with national believers to alleviate the problem of the negative relationship dynamic with the foreigner? Although I am still wrestling through this whole issue, I have some thoughts that may help stimulate our thinking and allow us together to find some solutions.

It is evident to me that a lot of the problem stems from the foreigner's ability to provide **material benefits**. The foreigner is often seen as a means for getting out of the quagmire of unemployment and hopelessness in which the national finds himself. So it is crucial that we set guidelines early on that will diminish this element in our relationships. This is probably the biggest area which many of us on the field have struggled with. When we have so much in comparison with many of those we are ministering to, it is difficult not to respond to requests for financial aid. But, this is the area I personally feel is most crucial for us to respond to properly and biblically if we are to see a strong independent national church.

I believe we need first to develop **biblical guidelines for our financial giving**. It is important for us to observe and follow the NT churches' example

of how they used their finances. It appears that in the early church they gave in two situations. The first was to those who were poor and without the means to work (Rom 15:26). This would also include what we would label relief work in the case of natural disaster (Acts 11:27-30). Note in 2 Thess. 3:10-13 that those who could work but chose not to were reprimanded, not offered financial help. Secondly, they also gave to the work of the ministry that the apostles and evangelists undertook (Phil. 4:15,16). In these instances churches helped those in need within their own fellowship, other churches which were in need, and the work of the ministry. I find no record of the apostles giving to meet financial needs in the churches they had planted.

Defining poverty is not always easy. I would define it as referring to those who are without the basic necessities of life like food, clothing, and shelter (James 2:15-16). Currently I don't work with any believers who fall into this category. Some may not have much, but they do have what is necessary to live. More commonly I find there are those who don't have work and are still living off of their families. In such cases I think we should **assist them in finding employment** rather than giving money directly to them. This can be done in a number of ways. We have given responsibility to one or two people in our city who are focused primarily on helping nationals start small businesses. These business ventures are well thought through, have strong accountability, and are

structured as small bank loans that are manageable to be paid back. These projects are designed to help local believers provide for themselves and are developed outside of the context of the local church and its ministry. Since God has commanded us to work, we feel that the issue of financial need can best be handled in this way. Giving money can damage people. Helping them to be employed to meet their own need and the needs of others and the church can only build them up.

A good article to read in relation to giving financially to nationals is *Should We Stop Sending Money* by Robertson McQuilken. He deals more in depth with the lack of biblical support for and the practical experiences of the dangers of foreign funds supporting the work of national believers and the national church.

Another principle that seems consistent in the NT church was that regular gifts were given by the church and with a known purpose (ex.—to help the poor—Rom 15:26, to assist a ministry—Phil 4:15-16). It is good to **develop the practice of giving as a group** to help others, no giving being done under the table. This helps us develop trust and unity as a group. If everyone is aware of the need and as a group have decided to help, we are encouraging unity and a spirit of family. Having the group involved in knowing about and meeting the need may also limit those who try to take advantage of the foreigner. In this way no one is receiving money or special benefits without the others' knowledge. Usually

when a national believer comes to me requesting money I tell him that it is the responsibility of the church to meet the needs of its members. Therefore, the financial request needs to be discussed, not with me the foreigner, but with the body of believers as a whole. If the person requesting the financial aid isn't seriously in need he usually won't go to the other believers. If he is serious it is beneficial that the national believers make the decision as to how he is to be helped. In most cases when I have taken this approach, either the person has not pursued the matter or he has been helped by the other believers.

From the very beginning it is important to encourage the national believers to be involved as a group in meeting one another's needs, rather than letting them expect just the foreigner to give. **It must be taught and applied that the church is responsible to care for the needs of its members.** The biblical principle of giving is very important. I think we rob our national brothers of blessing and their responsibility if we as foreigners meet their material and financial needs. They, as well as we, are responsible to give according to their ability and beyond their ability (1Cor. 8:3). In applying this principle we give value to the national church and help them to become independent. The more we can help national believers responsibly care for one another, the more they will learn to depend on one another. Practicing these biblical guidelines may help eliminate some of the elements that cause nationals to draw

close to us rather than to their national brothers.

I do not advocate not giving anything to nationals, but think it is important to give in the right ways. We must **avoid giving in ways that will cause dependence** and which will subvert the responsibility and blessing of national believers. Giving through an organization or person who is loaning money for small business ventures is one way we can give responsibly. I also believe that we have a responsibility to help those who are truly in need, as described in Jam. 2:15-17 and explained earlier. On some occasions we have helped impoverished people outside of the local church context with an urgent medical expense, food, or clothing. It is important to consider each situation in terms of dependency and the responsibility of the local Body.

Before moving on I want to share briefly some things I have used in responding to financial requests. I have found it very helpful to **be up front with nationals** and let them know the struggles we have in giving to them. I have tried to explain to them that I don't like to give money because it may destroy our relationship and our relationship is too important. I have also told some brothers that I desire that they learn to depend on God and not me for support. I have also shared that Muslims believe that the only reason a Muslim becomes a disciple of Jesus is because he receives money or some other material benefit, and I want them to be able to tell their Muslim friends that they follow Jesus without

such. With the national body of believers we have also encouraged them to minister within their means as the Lord provides and not compare themselves to those who may have more resources and can have a larger ministry. All of these explanations have been well received by my friends, and it has cut down on many asking me for money.

One other element that is important for developing godly relationships is **modeling trust and unconditional love** in our relationships. Many times I hear statements of mistrust and doubt from believers about other believers. It is easy to begin to fall into the trap of doubting others and questioning the hearts of people. I appreciate guys like Barnabas who, when in the beginning the disciples doubted Paul, came to his side and stood with him (Acts 9:26-27). And, when Paul didn't want John on the second journey, Barnabas stood up for him and gave him a second chance (Acts 15:37-39). If we truly trust God we can trust others as well. God is able to compensate for the times we may trust someone and make a mistake. We are bound to get hurt sometimes, but if we are going to see trust built up among our national brothers we need to model it ourselves.

Gossip and criticism of others is a deadly sin in destroying relationships between people. We need to be careful how we talk about other people to believers. I appreciate this country's societal principle that you don't talk about someone when that person isn't present. We need to purposely strive to

build up others and overlook faults. It is easy to focus on weaknesses but if we take the time to **focus on the good in people** I believe attitudes can change. Helping our national brothers to do this can only strengthen their relationships. An exercise to try might be to ask them to write down something they appreciate about another brother with whom they don't have a strong relationship and give it to that brother to encourage him. Also, develop the habit that if you have criticism about someone the first person you say something to is the person with whom you have the criticism. The group needs to work together on this as well. It is important that believers not only avoid tearing others down but that they also refuse to listen to that sort of talk from others.

Because they grow up in a society where lying is acceptable and acceptance by others is conditional, we see many believers here with problems of insecurity. Our **relationships** need to be **characterized by truth and unconditional love and acceptance**. Only as our national brothers feel unconditionally accepted and loved by God and other believers, and as they learn to deal with one another in truth, can there be the security in their lives that will free them up to not have to compete for the acceptance of the foreigner.

The **meeting place** also seems to have a great significance in effecting this dynamic of trying to be close to the foreigner. As many others have suggested, I think it is wise for us to begin in a national home or move the church

out of the foreigner's home as soon as possible. I am finding that this forces nationals to take the initiative as well as bonding them together. The believers here do not yet have a home to meet in apart from a foreigner's residence. But we decided together that during the warm and dry months it is better for them to meet outside on their own with no foreigners present. This limits the contact with the foreigner and if the group is going to continue to meet together it will strengthen the relationships between the believers. As the group has matured we have also removed ourselves from the meeting time even when the group meets in our homes.

Two of the believers in our city have a friend who is very seriously considering following Jesus. We are encouraging them even now to think about how they will continue to minister to these guys outside of the context of foreigners when they become believers. Our goal is to equip them to minister and allow God to use them in their context to see the church built up.

**Agree together as foreigners
and nationals that no one will
benefit from the foreigner in any
way other than spiritual help**

Another thing we are currently doing in our situation is to agree together as foreigners and nationals that no one will benefit from the foreigner in any way other than spiritual help. For example the foreigner will provide resources like books and tapes, or provide teaching and training, or be a resource to funnel names of BCC

students or other seekers to national believers. The foreigner is teaching and training one or two of the national leaders who in turn will teach and train the others. This obviously limits the contact that the foreigner has with the whole group of national believers. Although this seems to be a more effective model the potential problem we see and have experienced to some extent is that other nationals are aware that the national leaders have contact with the foreigners. Their conclusions sometimes are that the leaders are receiving material benefits which they themselves aren't receiving. Especially for new believers coming into the group this can create the same problems we have discussed earlier with jealousy.

Conclusion

The main experience that we have had in our ministry context is working with young single, mostly unemployed, men and women. Most of what I have discussed in this paper comes out of that context. As we pray and minister we are asking God to give us families. I believe as we see more **families** come to Christ **who may be more secure with jobs and some level of financial stability** this dynamic that we observe now may become less and less powerful. I would be interested in talking with those who may have more experience with Christian families and see if some of what is being discussed here is

felt more or less strongly as it is with young single men and women. Also, one strategy which we are trying to implement more in N. Africa is to **focus our ministry in existing social structures where relationships between nationals are already strong**. As we see that happen more in the future we may also see less tension in our relationships.

The purpose of this paper was to help us look at our relationships with nationals and learn to relate to them in ways that will help the church to be established more securely. We need to be aware of some of the cultural patterns in the relationships we are building. As many of us have already discovered there are not always easy answers to some of the struggles we face. There are pros and cons to each model that we develop in our ministry and situations we find ourselves in can vary greatly from one to another. I'm hopeful that as we dialogue and share experiences we will be able to walk in greater wisdom and determine how to minister more effectively to our national brothers and sisters. Love covers a multitude of sins! May we continually seek the Lord's guidance and not allow our own desires and fleshly wisdom to keep us from being used for His glory. I welcome your input and wisdom as we seek to see his church established throughout the Arab world.