

MentorNet #30

A Move to Self-Support in an Indigenous Church Planting Endeavour: Self-Support Issues in India

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In March of 2005, the MentorNet editors were invited to train and consult with workers in a church planting movement in India. They were able to make several observations.

Background

Six Christian Indian professional men, medical doctors and military officers from different states, plan and direct a cooperative church planting endeavour. In the past four years, together they have seen more than fifty thousand verifiable house churches planted in the northern states called the “Hindi belt”.

They have established and maintained five intentional levels of church-planting trainers:

1. International, interstate directors who train and supervise...
2. Regional (states of 70 to 170 million) co-ordinators who train and supervise...
3. Full-time district (2½–3 million) church-planters who train and supervise...
4. Block co-ordinators who train and supervise five to ten ...
5. Congregational shepherds who lead ten families and mentor novice shepherds.

Last year, the Directors informed all trainers that they have until the end of 2006 to become self-supported. Their reasons for the move to self-support include these:

- Depleting resources.
- Slowing of the endeavour.
- Theology of ‘resources in the harvest’.
- Sorting out those with only financial motives.
- To set a strong example for self-supported novice workers.

Observations

The trainers’ have begun to make adjustments to the move to self-support:

- Most were self-supporting before being hired as trainers, and they were already planting churches or evangelizing non-believers when hired.
- They were put on partial salary to allow them to travel and train more freely.
- The Partnership does not pay a living wage, so all have had to find additional funding.
- Funds for paying trainers come from both India and from overseas.
- Some already earn sufficient by leading seminars, others receive income from their churches and missions.

Real or perceived self-support issues and objections raised by the trainers:

- Other organizations are poised to pay salaries to those who defect to them.
- Could currently supported trainers keep their support while allowing trainees to remain self-supported?
- Directors have access to foreign money while asking trainers to become self-supported.
- It is unusual to find part-time work in India that would allow time to do training.

- Those who have already moved back to self-support are able to witness on the job, but so doing is less effective than was full-time training.
- Indian cultural tradition disapproves of holy men's seeking of non-religious income.
- Normally only one spouse earns; perhaps both could earn?

Scriptural objections to self-support, made by some trainers, included these:

- The Apostle Paul was a bachelor who could live on self-support, whereas the Apostle Peter had a family and received support.
- Jesus chose the Twelve from among self-supported workers and professionals.
- Old Testament Levites received tithes, so should be supported, too.
- Since one cannot serve "two masters" one should not be expected to do ministry work while doing business or earning their income.
- Those who earn their own support may become greedy for money.
- Paul sometimes worked with his hands and other times received gifts.

Means of self-support reported by the trainers included:

- Teaching in government schools.
- Government agricultural extension work.
- Horticulture.
- Sewing new clothing for the wholesale market.
- Keeping poultry and milk cows.
- Fish ponds.
- Tutoring students.
- Resale of sundry items in the streets and from door to door.
- Hire out as day labourer or rickshaw puller.
- Doing laundry for hotels.
- Building contractor.

Breakdown of mentoring

Although the movement's trainers have done a superb job of dedicated, spiritually-powerful and self-giving evangelism and church planting, they report that the first generation of novice shepherds of new churches has mostly not proven reproductive. The MentorNet authors made two observations which were confirmed by the Directors:

- Where there is a socio-economic difference between trainers and shepherds, the latter tend to become passive listeners, taking little or no initiative to emulate their trainers.
- The trainers often fail to listen to shepherds report on the activities and needs of their new flocks and so do not make plans with them about what they will do in their flocks until the next training session. Thus, training consists mostly in dispensing lessons and good but untimely advice.

Thus, the move to self-support will prove a partial solution, reducing the economic divide between trainers and shepherds.

The authors recommend that, where shepherds do take initiative to reproduce themselves and their churches, low-level trainers be recruited from the shepherds rather than from outside. So doing would virtually eliminate the socio-economic differences that hinder progress at the grass-root level.

Scriptures text cited by trainers

Deuteronomy 14:29 And the Levite, (because he hath no part nor inheritance with thee,) and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, which *are* within thy gates, shall come, and shall eat and be satisfied; that the LORD thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hand which thou doest.

Notes: The tithe was distributed to the poor as well as to the Levites. Most Christian workers today are neither Israelite nor Levites, nor are they found among the poorest.

Nehemiah 12:44 And at that time were some appointed over the chambers for the treasures, for the offerings, for the first fruits, and for the tithes, to gather into them out of the fields of the cities the portions of the law for the priests and Levites: for Judah rejoiced for the priests and for the Levites that waited.

Notes: The tithe was imposed by Law, a kind of government tax, and it was administered by appointed officials.

Matthew 6: 24 No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love mammon. 25 Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?

Notes: It is those who *refuse* to serve God if not supported, that try to serve two masters.

1 Corinthians 4:11 Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling place; 12 And labour, working with our own hands: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it:

Notes: The most effective, scriptural church planters often supported themselves.

Peter 5:1 The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: 2 Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight *thereof*, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; 3 Neither as being lords over *God's* heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.

Notes: First century church elders were not to lead their flocks from a financial motive.

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