**MISSION SUPPORT MODELS FOR THE AFRICAN CHURCH**

**Introduction**

**This paper is a as a result of the assignment given to the author by the ALT to explore ways and means of how best the Church in Arica can support and fund her mission enterprise with resources raised from within the continent in order to be weaned off from dependence on the Western Church and funding agencies. The paper challenges the Africa Church to take responsibility for supporting Christian ministries from its ranks. It also highlights some reasons that led to this dependence syndrome on the West to support and fund missions. Lastly, the paper draws attention to some suggested support models that the Africa Church may wish to consider.**

**Preamble**

The Church in Africa, which has experienced a dramatic growth in the last 30 years, is faced with a resource crisis. Many churches and mission agents would like to have adequate trained workers but are not able to generate enough local resources to undertake this very important task. There is a need to build ministry infrastructure as well as to equip lay people for their role in the ministry. Unfortunately churches in Africa are made to believe that they must go to the churches in the West to beg for these resources in order to take advantage of the many emerging opportunities before them.

What can the Africa Church do in the midst of all the challenges that face her and threaten the well being of the communities? The Church in Africa must subscribe to the understanding of God who is always present in the world and who is willing to transform it. Our God calls us to work with Him in order that he can transform the world through us. Our mission frontier is where the needs of the people are met in the name of Jesus. It is where displaced persons find new hope, where victims of ethnic hatred see the one who is a friend to all people. The hungry see Jesus as the person who gives them bread, the sick see him as the Great Physician, while the sinner sees Jesus as the one who pardons and restores wholeness. The Church in Africa must, more than ever before, begin to bear the imprint "made in Africa".

We must challenge the churches in Africa to be self-reliant as a way of proving that the Church has taken root and has developed an African character. I have often wondered how indigenous or independent African Initiated Churches (AICs) have demonstrated beyond doubt that the Church in Africa can be self-reliant. Many of these churches started without any visible support from the outside and have continued to grow and expand their mission strategies. They have localized their ministries and indigenized their polity to the extent that they have become in real terms “African”. They have proved that there are enough local resources to support their work. They have shown us that it is when people feel a sense of “ownership” that they are willing to give themselves to the task ahead, including full support of the Church's ministries. For when people truly own their own process they support it fully with all their resources. Needless to state that a church which lacks the resources for ministry to train and send its workers and finance its programmes, is not solidly founded, and has a precarious future ahead of it. Until we are able to plant churches, train our workers and run our missions and development programmes with funds sourced largely from within, we do not yet have a mature African Church.

**The Phenomenal growth of the Church in Africa**

The Church in Africa has after barely one hundred years in many parts of the continent, made tremendous progress towards growth and eventual maturity. Christianity Today reports:

The growth of the African Church in particular is jaw-dropping. In 1900 there were fewer than 9 million Christians in Africa. Now there are more than 541 million. In the last 15 years alone, the Church in Africa has seen a 51 per cent increase, which works out on average at around 33,000 people either becoming Christians or being born into Christian families each day in Africa alone[[1]](#footnote-1).

The Church in Africa has matured to the point of sending missionaries from its ranks to the rest of the world. However, the African Church has for many years been exposed to the Global North Model of supporting its missionaries. There is nothing wrong with this model in itself. This model has its challenges when implementing it in the African context because to a great extent Africa has a different economical and culture context and matrix. If the Church in Africa is to raise the challenge of sending missionaries commensurate with church growth, I suggest that she begins to pray and grapple about ways of developing a model or models that are Biblical, sustainable and contextualized.

**Giving out of Poverty?**

In terms of financial resources the local contribution of the African Church does not seem to have kept pace with the growth in church growth and missions. To this day, the African Church still looks up to the Global North Church and to many agencies of the Western Church for heavy financial inputs towards missions. But with the rapid growth of the church in Africa and the other parts of the developing world, there is an accompanying escalation in the demands of these churches from the funding agencies, whose resources are now overstretched. There is therefore the demand from various angles for the African Church to look inwards and demonstrate its growth and maturity in Missions by sourcing the funds needed for its projects from within the continent. This does not mean that outside resources are not needed, given the vast amount of human need we see in our world. What becomes clear, however, is that the indiscriminate infusion of outside resources can so easily cripple or destroy local creativity, which is sometimes fragile at best. It is often assumed that what people have to give back to God is too little or too insignificant to be of any use. Even in situations where poverty seems to prevail, it has been shown that people can often find something to give to God when they are encouraged or inspired to do so. Truly, when local creativity flows, the results can be dramatic. We must be sure that such creativity is not stifled by the prevalence of foreign funding which, as we all know, so often can destroy local initiative.

It goes without saying that the financial dependence of the African Church cannot be considered in isolation from the overall question of the political instability in the continent, the crushing debt burden, and the global economic super-structure which puts Africa in a permanent state of disadvantage. The African Church is an integral part of the contemporary African experience. She shares the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of Africa. While the Church in Africa may largely consist of the poor, hungry, starving, oppressed and deprived people, whose broken frames and battered bodies are often featured on Western television screens, it would be scandalous to accept the notion that church in such an economically depressed and dependent continent has absolutely nothing to give. One needs to look no further than the New Testament to see the truth of what I am saying. In 2 Corinthians 8 the Apostle Paul tells about taking a collection for those in need in Jerusalem. This was a collection taken from one of the mission churches he planted for the “mother” church in Jerusalem. What Paul says about the Macedonian believers is most striking. He describes them as being in severe trial and extreme poverty, yet he says “they begged for the privilege of giving”. We must be careful not to assume that people—even those living in either relative or absolute poverty—have nothing to give.

**The need to re-examine our current structures and systems.**

We know that a church that depends excessively on foreign aid is in a precarious state. And this leads us to the delicate issue of alien forms and structures that seem to perpetuate the dependence syndrome in the African Church. The missionaries did a good work of evangelizing the African continent. They set up structures patterned along the Western European model which they were used to. The emerging leaders of the African Church have accepted this model, which involves a network of impressive and often expensive structure that we can maintain only through foreign aid. With foreign aid sometimes comes foreign decision-making – the one who pays the piper calls the tunes. In addition and to a large extent, the form, organisation, systems and structure of missions, discipleship and training are essentially European and often superfluous. In some cases, they not only make an elite group out of our clergy and religious, often alienating them from the concrete socio-economic conditions of their people, but they also need continued financial input from foreign agencies.

This is not a healthy situation for the Church. If the African Church is going to stand on her feet, and support herself to a reasonable degree, there is need to re-assess the forms and structures along which we are presently operating. Considering the socio-economic exigencies of contemporary Africa, do we really need to maintain the Western model for the formation of missions and missionaries, whose structures often require heavy financial inputs? Has the time not come for us to design alternative models for missions that are more in agreement with our particular context? Can the institutions of the African Church not be structured differently and yet remain faithful to the Biblical teaching?

I believe that African Christians will support their church to the extent that the forms and structures of the church are inculturated and contextualized. I believe that the Christ followers in Africa will tax themselves and demonstrate their generosity in commitment towards the church, to the extent that the organisational and administrative forms and structures of the church adequately reflect their socio-cultural circumstances. But as long as we continue to maintain alien forms and structures, so long shall we put up with this vexatious dependence syndrome.

God has blessed Africa with many sources, including money and highly qualified and gifted leaders. Some church members own farms, houses and businesses. Unfortunately, these same people, while their churches struggle with mission support, only drop a few coins in the collection bag. It is not unusual to see some of these church members give expensive gifts at wedding receptions. There are nevertheless some individuals who are sincerely dedicated to the Lord and who witness to their faith wherever they go and are good givers. However, building a successful missionary programme, does not rest on individuals alone. Missions is most effective when it flows from the energized church as a whole. If the larger church is less than enthusiastic or living under the cloud of financial dependence, it will hardly send out its own people or overflow with missionary enthusiasm.

The pioneer missionary movement model cannot be reproduced. For example if a church was to launch a cross-cultural missionary program, the first phase would probably be characterized by foreign subsidy, and phase two might need a bank overdraft to keep it going. As I have argued before, wealth and poverty seem to have very little to do with breaking dependency, experiencing self-reliance, and creating an indigenous missionary movement. Financial independence has to do with a mentality of dependence that accompanied the spread of the gospel. How do African churches move from dependence on foreign funding to self- reliance? While recognizing that these problems did not appear over night and neither will their solutions, the first and sometimes most painful step for church leaders may be to say "no thank you" to the foreign funding that keeps them dependent.

In some rural churches leaders report that the poorer churches are the most likely to support their own programs and missionaries. Most are peasant farmers who give their offerings in the form of cattle, bags of maize, or other produce. At the same time, the wealthier churches of the same denomination remain dependent on overseas funding. It is therefore expedient to develop a model that is indigenous and can be reproduced. It has been observed that where Christianity can be reproduced successfully, cross-cultural evangelism is being carried on beyond ethnic borders. The complex structure of the Christian movement introduced into many parts of Africa, built over many years with millions of dollars, pounds, and Euros, has been hardly reproducible. ? Today in Africa, because of the weight of structures inherited from the past, church after church cannot even think of cross-cultural evangelism. Instead, church leaders are preoccupied with maintenance, indeed survival, rather than dynamic missionary outreach. They have little energy left to make cross-cultural outreach a reality, let alone a spiritually rewarding adventure. In the end, local leaders look like poor managers, even failures, for not keeping elaborate programs going. Expatriate missionaries during the colonial period ran the programs largely with foreign subsidy. How could they expect local believers to do it without the subsidy?

I submit that one of the most lamentable aspects of irreproducible church and mission structures is that the enormous flow of outside funding is what actually helps to keep many churches "poor." Over the years local Christians often found that it was not necessary to put paper money into the church offering plate. They knew that if they sat back and waited long enough, funds would eventually come from an unseen source. Sooner or later, the church and its program would be rescued. Ironically, those who created the programs could not afford to let them fail. People of compassion would somehow find the money and close the gap, if for no other reason than to save the reputations of those who had started the programs in the first place. They fear that the work into which they have poured their lives will be destroyed.

As I conclude this section allow me to give an illustration. You may or may not be aware that during the time of the Reformation, Roman Christianity could not be reproduced in Northern Europe. It did not offer a satisfying religious experience, nor were its structures compatible with the areas into which the Christian movement would expand. The movement badly needed to be restructured and made indigenous. The result was the Reformation in Northern Europe. That was indigenization. Aren't many churches in Africa still waiting for their own reformation and indigenization? When believers in this part of Africa make the Christian movement their own, they will more effectively join other Non-western churches in cross-cultural missions.

**Mutual Support Vs Self-Reliance**

Although I am strongly vouching for the African Church to raise her resources from within the continent, I am not in any way advocating for complete independence and self-reliant. I would be the first one to submit that the notion of self-reliance in missions is theologically inappropriate. I believe that we should be emphasizing mutual -support  inter-dependence, community, fraternity, and solidarity, instead of self-reliance. From New Testament times, no local church has ever been absolutely self-reliant. Nor is it even desirable that a Christian church be self-sufficient in all its needs. Rather, mutual support is part of the very essence of community. Believers in the early Church shared all they had in common (Acts 2:42). The Apostle Paul collected material aid for the needy Jerusalem church (2 Cor.9:1-15), in the same way as he got a call for help (in terms of personnel) from Macedonia (Acts 16:9). Individual Christians and local churches through the ages benefited from the resources, gifts and talents of one another, realizing that the Lord's is the earth and the fullness thereof.

Christians are one body in Christ, having different parts endowed with varied gifts and talents, which all must contribute for the promotion and well-being of the entire body of Christ. Thus through the ages, local churches have enriched one another, not only with material goods and personnel, but also with language, music, and the spiritual and cultural values to be found among different people in different places.

As the Church in Africa seeks to work in partnership with the Western church she must also seek to support herself more and more from local resources in different areas within the country. For example the local Christians in a particular economically advantaged region should be challenged to support with the resources those in an area that is not economically empowered before seeking outside aid - for charity begins at home. We must encourage the sharing of gifts, talents and resources among the members of every mission minded congregation. Local churches in each region should learn to share the little they have with their brethren who are less endowed than themselves.

**Disciples or Dependants**

Christ’s Commission is to make disciples and not dependants. To a large extent the Church has been making dependants. Let me explain. The Church or Mission agency may send people to take the Gospel to the unreached. By the grace of God folk may come to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. In turn when well disciple the new Christians help to take the message further – giving themselves and their resources to help promote the gospel. These are disciples indeed and not dependants. Consider the second picture of what sometimes happens. Let’s say that this army going out to spread the message does not make disciples, but rather people who become dependent on those carrying the message. This means that some of the resources the missionaries need for furtherance of the gospel are shared with the people they are trying to win for Christ. As they try to move on, their progress is hindered, rather than being helped. Instead of getting new resources to help in the cause, the people in this army are being drained of resources, slowing their progress toward world mission. Sometimes the missionaries decide to settle down and live there for the rest of their lives or their ministry. They make a commitment to help needy communities engage in what is sometimes called the syndrome of church development rather than the dynamic of spiritual outreach.

Obviously along the way the missionaries will meet people in need. A serious reading of the New Testament reveals that the Church is to assist those who are in need. The challenge is to discern whether people are facing absolute poverty, which demands immediate assistance, or relative poverty; which means that they most likely have something they could give. Time and again we see places where people–who appear to us to be in need–actually have something to contribute to the church, however small, such as a bucket of maize, joyfully given to further God’s kingdom.

What therefore can we do in places where the church has become characterized by “dependents” rather than “disciples?” First, it is necessary to find out whether the gospel is truly transforming the hearts of those who hear it. If there is only marginal commitment to Jesus Christ, we should not be surprised when adherents act like dependents rather than disciples. We should not expect people who do not have a personal relationship with the Lord to become enthusiastic supporters of his kingdom. So the whole gospel must first be preached, along with a call to serious commitment to God’s cause. That is to say serious discipleship modeled and taught.

Second, if this graduation to disciples is going to be successful, then the challenge must be to join the world-wide spread of the gospel. The local Church will need to stop hiding behind her inadequacy and discover that apart obedience to the Holy Spirit, she will never become adequate. This means transitioning from the syndrome of church development to the dynamic of missionary outreach. The Church in Africa should become deeply rooted in the society of which it is a part and then draw resources from that society for both its own existence and for missions.

**Below, I draw your attention to some suggested support models that the Africa Church may wish to consider.**

**Suggested Models:**

### Church-Run Businesses

Churches can always actively pursue sources of income outside of the tithes and offerings. Today in Africa opportunities for churches to create alternative sources of income abound. These range from schools to real estate investment. I know of a few churches in Africa that are making a huge contribution to missions from income raised outside the traditional systems.

The local church leadership can summon the knowledge of someone within her ranks with business acumen to educate and encourage the local churches to establish a business that would assist among other things to promote and fund missions. However, this initiative though under the auspices of the local church/es must be left to run as a business with qualified people in charge, who also have integrity. The people running such a business would need to be careful and discerning when doing business with folk from within the church.

Before a business is launched the team responsible must cover all of the angles the church should address for such a business. These may include the overview of the business plan that should guide the church’s thinking with specific information on the legal, insurance, and tax implications a business poses to a church. It is likely that sometimes the business established by the church may compete with church members who, as business people, are simply trying to make a living from the same kind of business. In any case such church members are expected to cooperate with the church which is operating a church-run business which is their nearest competition.

1. **Internal Resource Mobilization**

Let me illustrate:

A leader of a certain congregation told an incident of how his church was for a long time seeking support from overseas partners for a medical clinic for his community. The church had written many project proposals and only received about $2000 which could hardly build even a one-roomed clinic. It dawned upon them that, if they really wanted it, they had to do it themselves. The committee sat down, drew a program for fund raising and then taught the church members on the need to support this ministry. They asked people to bring things in kind such as chickens, farm produce, goats, cows etc. Within one single day they were able to raise the equivalent of US$20,000, enough to build and equip the clinic. What was more important, they discovered that they could do it. This convinced them of their own their strength on which they can now build to support other church ministries.

I believe that the church in Africa is endowed with the resources to support her own ministry. The challenge is to realize this fact and to know how to tap these rich resources. The spiritual resource of the church should be able to propel it to realize many other opportunities in ministry. Africa needs a paradigm shift in her thinking of missions. Let our friends and partners help us to realize our potential by letting us "walk on our own feet."

Most believers on the continent have no idea of what discipleship means. Those who have had the privilege of being discipled have to a great extent being given a skewed dosage of discipleship. The focus has been on individual personal growth. Great as this might be, it is only a one sided coin. Holistic discipleship encompasses ones responsibility toward and before God, the Community and self. If my faith does not positively impact me and my community then I must have a serious examination of my relationship with God. I believe that the poor giving to missions among many Christians is simply because they have not been adequately discipled.

1. **Mobilization of Christian Business People**

In the Western World the need to mobilize Christian businessmen and women to honour Christ in their business transactions as well as with their resources was realized many years ago. For example GiantsForGod was founded in order to honor great Christians in business and share the inspirational true stories of those who have put the Lord first in their business – those who have committed their lives to humbly serving God rather than themselves. Another example is the CBMC[[2]](#footnote-2) (Christian Business Men for Christ) – a group of men in the market place boldly living out their Christian faith in authentic relationships and hence create a powerful alliance in the workplace & Christian community. There is also the BMF (Business Men’s Fellowship) and many others. These people are well discipled and think Biblically in their business.

We must as a Church in Africa encourage our business folk to create such groups. As Christians in the business world, their desire should be to love Christ Jesus more than their work or their wealth. This doesn’t come naturally for many, so these groups will help each other mature into the business people God wants them to be. Christian businessmen and women know the pressures and realities of the marketplace. One of the initial goals of such a group should be to reach their fellow workers and business contacts with the good news of Jesus Christ in a non-threatening, one-on-one engagement of heart. If Christian business people have such support groups where they are well discipled, their giving to the Lord’s work and involvement in missions will flow out of the abundance of their love for the Lord. The initial steps toward the formation and mobilization of such a group should be taken by committed business folk and not the missionaries. The missionaries may facilitate the process where necessary.

For the Christian business folk, business is not just about wealth, it’s about putting God and business in proper perspective. We should realize that today’s market place ministry is for those individuals who are equipped and empowered to answer the Great Commission. Business people can indeed affect today’s market place with the life transforming realities of the Lord, Jesus Christ.

1. **Missionaries as Tent Makers**

We read of Paul and his co-workers, Priscilla and Aquila being tent-makers while pursuing the primary goal of preaching Christ (Acts 18: 1 – 5). Paul worked specifically in Galatia, Corinth, Thessalonica, and Ephesus using his skills of tent-making to take him in some difficult mission fields. However, today the term has taken on a broader definition than just the skill of making tents. I use this term to refer to a committed, spiritually mature Christian who views work in the light of the Great Commission and as an opportunity to serve the Body of Christ. As a matter of fact a tentmaker may be in formal employment or run a business as an entry strategy in a ‘restricted’ country or community with the aim of sharing Christ. A tent maker is intentional and deliberate about spreading the Gospel and making disciples. Tent makers may not be ministry professionals but are expected to be well equipped and experienced.

Tent-making affords opportunities to grow natural relationships with the community. It also conserves the limited mission funds, at a time when the cost of living is on the increase everywhere, since missionaries need to be fully supported. I know of many Christians who do not feel called to serve as “full-time Christian workers” but are willing to use their skills, professions and careers to serve in a particular context so they can be light and salt in the community by modeling and sharing Christ. Paul preached to the Jews on Sabbath in the synagogue, and during the week he worked as a Tentmaker talking to merchants and travelers. Paul’s skill furnished him with the opportunity to minister and it also gave him legitimacy because he was providing a needed skill in the community. Some refer to this as ‘Access Ministry’. There is need to promote various methods of doing missions. No one methodology is better than the other. There is a role for ‘traditional mission’ as well as for tent-making. As observed, in tent-making we see God calling his people into a trade while equipping them for the work of ministry (Exodus 35: 30 – 36:2). In our complex and Christian unfriendly world we must be sensitive to the leading of the Spirit and practical in reaching the world for Christ. No one size fits all. We must contextualize methodologies and approaches in missions.

1. **Empowerment Funding Support Model**

It is a well know fact that the Global North Church has poured thousands of dollars into the Church in Africa for many years. This financial support is still well sought by many. In fact the situation has been made to appear as though if this stream of funding dried up then Christian ministry in Africa would be stunted. Most of the funds are directed toward supporting projects ranging from feeding programs to putting up infrastructure. They may be referred to as ‘restricted funds’ or “ring fenced” or by any other similar terminology. Such funds have achieved recommendable and recognizable results. They are good reasons for applying such conditions to funds strictly meant for specific projects.

On the other hand ‘restricted funds’ do have their flaws. Let me explain. In most instances finances would be given to benefit the project only and yet the Christians on the ground supervising the funds are not considered when allocating these funds. In the Western world, this is to be expected as the individuals administrating the funds are well provided for by their well to do churches, families and friends. This often is not the case in Africa. The economics matrix is very different between the North and Africa.

I would like to submit that the partners – the donors and recipients should enter into some discussions on how the donors could facilitate the growth of resources and empowerment of the recipient workers when such donations are being made. For to continue sending funds without empowering the local worker/missionaries, is to perpetuate the dependence syndrome and disempowering the project managers at the receiving end.

1. **The Diminishing Level Support**

God's mission invites Christians to join hands with one another and to work together as companions with our sisters and brothers around the world. Working with Christians and people of other nations from around the world can enhance the life, faith and witness of God’s Mission. The body of Christ is most effective when it is working together through a common purpose. It is largely recognized that the Western Church has more financial resources than her African counterpart. The Church in the West has been and continues to be generous in sharing these resources. As already pointed out, the Church in Africa must look to herself for resources for missions, while remaining in partnership with the Christians in the West.

While the support given to the Church in African is appreciated, I would like to advocate for a system where the two entities can enter into agreement for financial support - an agreement or arrangement that will eventually wean off the African Church from dependence. Let us suppose that Church/Ministry ‘A’ in Europe has an agreement with Church/Ministry ‘B’ in Africa that for the first, say, two years Ministry ‘A’ would be giving 100% support to ministry ‘B’. In the third year Ministry ‘A’ reduces the support by 25% so that these difference is met by Ministry ‘B’. Suppose this arrangement continues until on a 25% diminishing level of support from ‘A’ while ‘B’ increases its revenue from within. A time will come when ‘A’ would no longer need to give funding to ‘B’ since ‘B’ would have graduated from support and would be raising all her funds from within. At this point ‘A’ may decide to give as she pleases to give the partnership going but will not feel obliged.

1. **Networking**

The Church is one body - the Body of Christ. Unfortunately, the different tag that each part of the Body carries has, in many instances, led to non-cooperation and net-working. Evangelical spirituality accepts unity in diversity embraces and exploits it for the extension of the Kingdom of God.

Networking helps to leverage your mission and personal connections maximize your potential in ministry. However, in networking we must be strategic and focused. Networking our ministry means that we shall have to be proactive - we would need to make a plan, be focused and be consistent. There are number Christian ministries in Africa whose ministry focus is similar to OM. OM Africa should seriously think about partnering and networking with such like minded ministries.

**Conclusion**

After almost 150 years of missionary enterprise in many parts of Africa it is unacceptable that the church has not graduated from dependence on the West. Africa must not internalize poverty and find comfort in doing so. Equally, our Western friends have a responsibility to ensure that Africans are empowered and equipped to undertake missions in ways that do not perpetuate dependence on them. The Mission statement that God has given to OM to see vibrant communities of Jesus followers among the least reached, can only be realized if the African Church takes ownership of the Mission thrust on the continent.

**Respectively submitted by:**

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1. http://www.christiantoday.com/article/a.growing.church.why.we.should.focus.on.the.bigger.picture/49362.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In some States it has incorporated women in business and is referred to as Christian Business Men-Women for Christ. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)