

A NEW LOOK AT MISSIONARY SUPPORT

by Kenneth Williams, Ph. D.

Many of us have been taught that our relationship with "donors" means that we receive money and prayer support, and they receive information. Nothing more. So our goal is to find churches and people who will give to us as to the Lord, expecting very little in return. But as I translated Philippians for the Chuj people in Guatemala I discovered that Paul was writing a letter to people who were partners with him in serving God (1:5,4:15 RSV). It was a partnership of "giving and receiving," in which the context and the Greek indicate that each was giving and receiving to each other.

I began to ask myself, "What am I giving to those who support me, besides information?" As I pondered my relationship with them it became clear that it was not a true partnership. Partnerships are mutual. But I had been doing almost all of the receiving and very little of the giving.

Thus began a journey which eventually brought me into a delightful new view of missionary support - a paradigm shift from traditional thought, especially in that era. As I share this view please consider it with an open heart, to learn what the Lord might have for you. You may have already adopted this approach. If not, you don't have to agree with everything. Take what is helpful and leave the rest.

I believe our side of partnerships centers on two major issues: gratitude and ministry.

Gratitude

This is the foundation stone. It certainly was Paul's. "I thank my God every time I remember you" (Phil. 1:3). See 4:10-19. An attitude of gratitude is so critical that without it most of us will be doomed to struggle financially.

God's nature is to respond to a grateful heart, as hundreds of Scriptures affirm. He responds to our financial needs when we consistently thank Him for His financial provision, and for those whose hearts He has touched to be partners in the gospel. And He has created us in His image, to respond as He does. When we express our gratitude to others, their nature is to respond, motivated to pray, give, and be even more involved with us. Our motivation for thanking God and people must not be to get them to respond, but an expression of our genuine gratitude.

Gratitude unexpressed is ingratitude! It's not enough merely to feel thankful toward our partners. We must communicate it. See Luke 17:11-19 for a powerful example of ingratitude. We must ask ourselves: "Do I consistently express my thanks to God and to others for every act of kindness shown, for every gift given?"

1. Effective and ineffective methods of expressing gratitude.

Printed letters may be useful for conveying information but not for communicating gratitude. Our thanks must be personally expressed. For those who are in partnership with us, printed letters with no handwritten notes and e-mail messages with no personal references to the person receiving them are not enough. They have little impact on most people, amidst the onslaught of junk mail.

Here are some methods of communicating that are more effective than printed letters:

- a. A well done computer-generated letter with personal references to the recipient, news and an expression of gratitude. These are becoming less useful as they become more common.
- b. A short handwritten letter of thanks, with a little news.
- c. An e-mail message with personal references to the recipient, a little news, and thanks. Short is usually better than long.
- d. A printed letter with handwritten personal comments and thanks. What do you read first when you receive a prayer letter with a personal note written on it?
- e. A handwritten post card.
- f. A phone call, especially if the focus is on listening rather than telling our stories.
- g. A note, e-mail message, post card or call just to say how much you appreciate them and nothing else. This has great impact.

Writing personal letters and notes is hard work and time consuming. But people prefer frequent short notes, post cards and e-mails over infrequent long ones.

Do you choose to communicate personally "with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men," thus obeying Colossians 3:23? This doesn't make it less work, but it can take the drudgery out of it!

2. Make the most of one-time and occasional gifts through gratitude. People who give to you once are your best contacts for possible partnership. Here is an idea: When someone sends a one-time gift, send personal notes every month or two for a year. Don't mention financial needs. Many will be so encouraged by your loving gratitude that they will want to be more involved in your life and ministry. Nearly \$1,000 of our monthly support comes from people who originally meant to give only one gift, but through our ministry to them God touched their hearts to become partners.

When partners send money quarterly, annually or only occasionally, write them personally at least every two months as a ministry to them.

Ministry

In 1968, when we began to make the paradigm shift from "donor relations" to true partnerships, we realized that another indispensable aspect of our responsibility was to minister to them, as Paul did with his partners in Philippi. So we began using Philippians as a guide for our ministry to them. I hope you will study "A Biblical Example of Partnership in Missions" below.

1. A different approach.

This approach may not be best or feasible for you, but I urge you to at least consider it, then adapt it to your situation. In 1968 we began sending personal letters and notes every month to each of those who were giving, and we assumed praying (42 singles or couples, and 3 churches).

We decided to focus most of our efforts on really ministering to those special people and churches that God had already brought into partnership with us. Incredible things began to happen. Within two years, nearly all of them were drawing into a much deeper relationship with and commitment to us. At that time we returned to work in the home office, and our financial support increased 30%. All of the extra came from our partners, without our mentioning additional needs.

2. Some ways to minister to partners.

The traditional focus on "fund raising" and "donor relations" has been on our needs, not theirs. This isn't only unbiblical but frankly it doesn't work very well, especially in light of today's realities. We need to focus on their needs and on how we can appropriately minister to them. This means we must get to know them and their needs as time goes by. In our experience, nearly everyone needs the following kinds of ministry.

- a. Love. This is the basis for our relationship. We often tell our partners that we love them, and show our love in practical ways. We may be the only ones who tell them they are loved!
- b. Gratitude. Paul expressed his gratitude for the readers of every letter except the Galatians. For many it will be the greatest encouragement they receive on a regular basis! They will never tire of hearing it, if we're creative in how we express it. See *Fifty Ways of Expressing Gratitude to Partners*.
- c. Caring listening. When we're with our partners we spend most of the time listening to their joys and struggles, rather than telling our neat stories. When we call them we say, "You've heard about us in our letters. We want to hear all about you."
- a. Being a friend. Many Christians in America are friendless. Few have true friendships which last a lifetime, and go with them wherever they go. Being a true, caring friend over the years is a wonderful, powerful ministry to them (and to us).

- b. Prayer. Paul prayed for his partners, and told them so. We need to pray fervently, faithfully and regularly for our partners, and let them know. Ask for prayer requests, and follow up to discover how God is working. They need prayer as much as we do! We may be the only ones who pray for them regularly. I like to pray through Phil. 1:9-11, Col. 1:9-11 and Eph. 3:14-19 for our partners.
- c. Practical help. We've given money to partners in need. Why should we be the only ones to receive financial help? When we're with them we can help around the house, with cleaning, yard work, painting projects, small repairs, etc.
- d. Spiritual ministry. As the years go by we can have a very significant spiritual ministry through our letters, prayers, phone calls and visits. We can encourage them in their walk with the Lord, exhort them, be role models of godly people, share what we're learning from the Lord, and help them focus on Jesus. Do you realize that just being in partnership with you over the years will draw most or all of them closer to the Lord?
- e. Opportunities for involvement. It is a privilege to be personally involved in God's work! As our partners pray, give, and get others involved with us they are blessed. Discover ways for them to provide practical help and expertise to you and other missionaries. Remember, they are laying up treasure in heaven through their partnership with us. Discover those partners who are willing and able to have a small group of friends and relatives come to their home for an informal time of getting to know you. You might ask your partners to interview you, or encourage questions. If you need more support, people in groups like this are usually far more open than those who have no common ground with you.
- f. Information. I've come to believe information is not as important as most missionaries think, especially today. Yes, they do need information about us, our mission and our ministry. But they don't need as much as we need to give! People are saturated with information overload. Our partners are not only interested in our work but also in our personal lives. Most need to know how we (and our family) are, a little of what we're doing for the Lord, and one or two prayer requests. They prefer a little information at a time, provided often.

Some Qualities of Partners

As you read these, consider whether they are true about those who support you. It will help you understand whether they consider themselves partners or donors.

1. Partners assume responsibility. Our partners have taken responsibility for us. For over 40 years we have done no "support raising" whatever. They share our needs with family and friends, and encourage them to get involved, because they are so blessed.
2. Partners are in it for the long haul, usually for life. Virtually of ours have stopped being partners without extreme circumstances on their part.

3. Location is irrelevant to partners. They don't care whether we are living and working overseas or in the home country, as long as they know we are serving God in ways they want to be a part of.
4. Partners give all they can. All of our partners have significantly raised their support. In all these years in the U.S. God has provided more than full support. And over half of our partners have become involved with other missionaries, at our encouragement.
5. Partners don't give just because we are needy. Whatever our level of support, they eagerly want to be a part of our lives and ministry because they are so blessed.

Conclusion

All of this means a serious commitment of time and effort. But when we consider it as a key part of our overall ministry rather than just writing donors, we see it in a new light. Most of our partners have been involved with us for over 40 years! Imagine the incredible power of ministering to the same people for that long. We know that their lives are different, yes better, because of our ministry to them, and theirs to us. We've come to see this as one of the most joyful and productive areas of our life and work. When we get to heaven we may find that it was one of the most important in God's eyes.

Now a question for you: Do you think in terms of "having to raise support" or "getting to raise support?" The answer to this question will reveal whether you are relating to them as donors or to partners.

A Biblical Example of Partnership in Missions

Philippians was Paul's letter to a church in partnership with him. Here are a dozen principles Paul used in his letter which we can use also. I urge you to make these part of your relationship with your partners.

1. Paul expressed his gratitude to them (1:3-5) and specifically mentioned their gifts, past and present (4:10,15-18).
2. Paul was in partnership with them and let them know it (1:5, 4:15). That partnership was mutual: both were giving and receiving.
3. He reminded them of how God looked on their part and that He would reward them (4:17-19). Partners need to hear often how precious their part is in God's eyes.
4. He communicated his joy: in his service and situation (1:18, 2:17), for their concern for him (4:10), and for their prayers (1:19). People want to be involved with missionaries who serve God joyfully!
5. He expressed his love and affection for them (1:8,4:1). For most partners you will be the only person who tells them you love them and long to see them.

6. He thanked God for them and told them so (1:3,7). Do you faithfully thank the Lord for each of those who support you, and then let them know it?
7. He prayed for them and let them know he was praying (1:4,9-11). You may be the only person who prays regularly for many of your partners.
8. He talked about the relevance of his ministry (1:12-17).
9. He reported on his work and circumstances, and how he felt about these (1:12-18,20-22).
10. He shared very personally about his growth, struggles, victories, goals and walk with the Lord (1:19-24, 2:17,27, 3:8- 14, 4:11-13). Paul certainly didn't try to put on a facade of being a perfect missionary.
11. He exhorted, taught, encouraged and was a blessing to them.
12. He focused on Jesus, and encouraged them to do so (2:5-11). As you apply these principles you will begin to see that a very real purpose of relating to your partners is to have a ministry in their lives—a ministry of encouragement, prayer, exhortation and teaching, motivated by gratitude to God and to them.