

# MBB Church, Inc. in Bangladesh

*Overcoming the Destructive Effects of Naïve Western Funding*

By John Smith (a pseudonym)

Bangladesh is often viewed as the prototype of success for ministry to Muslims. So as a second generation MK working among the Muslim-Background Believer (MBB) church in Bangladesh, I have often been asked by missions-minded Westerners about the current issues facing this young church. From my perspective, the biggest issue is not persecution, nor the various approaches to contextualization, but rather the destructive flow of well-intentioned but naïvely distributed Western funding. As a result of this money, following Jesus in Bangladesh quickly becomes primarily a lucrative financial venture for even the most sincere convert. Local believers become disillusioned and embittered, while Muslim neighbors are confirmed in their belief that the only reason anyone would become a Christian is greed for easy Western dollars. All this funding for 'indigenous movements' has stifled healthy independence and exacerbated disunity, deception, jealousy and hostility among the MBB community. These hostilities have climaxed in instances of threatened court cases among leaders, alleged assassination attempts of fellow MBB leaders, and local leaders inviting Muslim authorities to assist in uprooting rival 'movements'. I don't claim to have any foolproof solutions below, but there is a crying need for Western donors to consider these issues.

To illustrate the situation, I will patch together a number of real examples into a generic storyline. It begins with the contact between a newly-arrived Western mission representative and one of the few English-speaking MBBs in the country. The Westerner is impressed with this local believer's tremendous stories of front-line ministry and is urged to accept the role of financial patron to his fast-multiplying pyramid of 'grassroots' evangelists/community development workers. There is no need for the Westerner to waste time with intensive language and culture study, as God's Kingdom could be built faster by taking the role of donor relations for this exciting movement, allowing his new local brother to govern the movement as the obvious cultural insider. As things progress, there

are exciting reports from the evangelists of possibly a million Jesus-followers, but the local MBB does not allow any 'outsiders' to attend any field-level meetings. The Westerner patron recognizes that his foreign presence at the field-level could hinder the movement, but he is confident that the numbers are true when he attends a large conference of two hundred eager believers in one small village. After a few years progress, the Western donor might discover some type of 'deception' by his local partners. The evangelists have been paying poor villagers to be baptized for the camera and exaggerating the number of believers. In fact, the 'believers' he saw at the village meetings were poor Muslim villagers paid to attend and instructed to show enthusiasm. He discovers his full-time salaried evangelists are simultaneously salaried by other missions and denominations. When the blow-up occurs, it turns out the organization's land and assets were written in the name of the local leader and have become his personal property. When the foreign money stops flowing, these 'indigenous movements' shrivel back to nothing. These latter events rarely earn a mention in Western mission magazines. What went wrong?

This story has been repeated many times in Bangladesh, and the free flow of Western funding has incited a tremendous amount of jealousy and disunity among MBB leaders. Pyramids of salaried evangelists switch denominations depending on the donor who is in-country at the time. Each denomination's 'indigenous CP movement' is flaunted in the West with figures that are often highly exaggerated, causing many agencies to take this 160-million-strong Muslim people group off their 'unreached' lists and cease recruitment. The few long-termers that come out with these Western-funded movements are frustrated by local partners preventing them from language study and keeping them absorbed in donor relations. Across the border in India, we hear similar stories, and veteran workers among Muslims in Indonesia, Malaysia and Central Asia have echoed that these issues of Western money are equally prominent in their areas.

The better I understand the Asian mindset, the more I see how these issues are primarily the fault of cross-cultural misunderstanding and miscommunication rather than naïve Westerners or greedy, deceptive Asians. As servants of the gospel, we have an obligation to act and speak in such a way that communicates clearly into local contexts; the onus is on us to learn and follow local norms of financial dealings. Understanding a few important cultural themes would go a long way to prevent these kinds of incidents:

### *Client-Patron Mentalities*

Many parts of South Asia have a 1,200 year history of almost continuous colonization and exploitation by wealthy outside ‘patrons’ be they Aryan, Persian, British or Pakistani. For better or worse the ‘patron-client’ mentality has become firmly embedded in local Bangladeshi culture. Foreigners are often viewed as moneybags who must be praised and eulogized but manipulated shrewdly whenever possible. It has been said that a foreigner is like faucet; he may not be flowing now, but if you stick around long enough, the money will eventually begin to flow.

### *Truth & Exaggeration*

Western societies are very particular about telling the literal ‘truth’ and are deeply concerned with statistical precision. The traditional Asian emphasis is on maintaining harmony in relationships. Exaggerations and small untruths are okay for the sake of maintaining accord or agreement. I will tell you whatever you want to hear (or what I think you want to hear) to keep things positive and moving along, and to avoid losing face. Having grown up in Asia, I struggle with this myself. Effective cross-cultural communication must take this into account:

#### **Asian MBB Report**

‘Yes! There are 100 people in my home village who are eagerly following Isa, and I am so busy preaching the gospel.’

‘There are 50 cell churches meeting around our district’

#### **Western Dynamic Equivalence Translation**

*‘Yes! There are a few people I know in my village who might be open to discussing Isa, and I am optimistic that some of them will someday become believers.’*

*‘We have 4-5 people gathering monthly to read the scriptures and if my contacts are doing what I tell them there should be more similar groups meeting.’*

When a financially vulnerable Asian believer interacts with a rich Western employer who seems very excited about convert statistics, this tendency is intensified significantly.

### *Who is to Blame?*

In Bangladesh, a victim is to blame for allowing himself to be swindled. When our laptop was stolen from our house last year, the community placed the blame solely on our shoulders for allowing ourselves to be taken advantage of; it wasn’t the thief’s fault. If the ‘beef’ one buys at the bazaar turns out to be chewy water-buffalo meat, it is the buyer’s fault for believing the butcher instead of scrutinizing the meat skeptically. Similarly, an employer or benefactor is considered really foolish and irresponsible if he leaves his staff *any* room for dishonesty and manipulation. It would be considered normal and even morally neutral for his employees to take advantage of such negligence and irresponsibility, especially since according to local values a wealthy patron is morally obligated to share his wealth anyway. The employee would not be blamed for siphoning off project money or exaggerating figures. In fact, *chalaki* (craftiness) is exalted as a positive virtue in many South Asian societies. We cannot expect such deeply-ingrained aspects of culture to simply vanish in new believers.

### *Affluence & Poverty*

To Bengali Muslims, the only reason someone would follow Jesus is greed for Western money and jobs. Consequently, many new believers are eager to disprove this by staying away from Western money or jobs. In Asia, everything is everybody else’s business and eventually even the most carefully-hidden salary becomes known to the community. However, a tremendous amount of family pressure is put on Asian men to provide for the wider family, and with the high unemployment and poor wages it becomes almost impossible to resist pursuing easy Western money. In addition, according to the locally-held limited-good mentality\* Westerners

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\* *‘limited good’* is a term used in anthropology to describe the belief, commonly held in traditional societies, that there is a limited amount of ‘good’ to go around. In other words, the amount of good luck, money, etc. available is held to be finite, so every time one person profits, another loses.

are wrong to not share their big money; so why not take their money? The most joyful, genuine and contagious believers I have seen are those unaware of the tempting salaries they could easily tap into.

***Our Response:  
A Call for Insightful Accountability***

As outsiders seeking to bless and build God's Kingdom in such cultures, how do we respond? We need to accept that deeply ingrained cultural patterns do not just disappear when people become believers, and our Asian brothers will have culturally ingrained tendencies toward particular sins just as Westerners have tendencies toward certain sins.

Donors in the West must realize that Western money can do just as much harm as good in missions. If we want to see a truly *indigenous* movement, it cannot be built by Western dollars. I pray for the careful, patient cultivation of truly indigenous movements where there is a healthy independence of outside funding. Inappropriate funding not only reinforces local notions of rice-Christians but also stifles local giving and initiative. The method of indigenous support sometimes propagated in the West advocating blind fund transfers without normal relationships of accountability is as ridiculous as asking a woman for physical intimacy without a relationship. Supporting indigenous workers is a good idea when it develops out of close relationships of genuine cultural understanding. This is consistent with Bengali patterns of charity and generosity, which to my observation are generally channeled through community relationships and monitored with a fair degree of skepticism. We must share God's resources with others, but wisely.

Us Americans must fight our characteristic fixation on business models, statistics, and cost-effectiveness and focus instead on mentoring relationships and character-development for long-term church health. When we focus on numbers of converts, we simply encourage exaggeration.

The path through this thorny issue is probably still the old incarnational model set by Jesus: 'As the Father has sent me, I have sent you' (John 20:21). Jesus spent thirty years in 'incarnational' language/culture study and only three in direct 'ministry', with only a motley assortment of disciples to show for his life's

ministry. Should we balk at the long years necessary to learn a language and culture fluently? Jesus' incarnational model is doomed to forever be 'inefficiently effective' – our business-based models of efficiency, quick results and money-driven movements seldom create the kind of character that can sustain a healthy indigenous church. Meanwhile we must support indigenous workers in culturally sensitive ways, perhaps with resources and friendship rather than finances. Ideally, we can interact primarily with more financially-independent upper-class people who already hold good secular jobs, as is expected of us by South Asian society. These more equal relationships can open local partners up to be more frank with us about how we handle our money.

As foreign partners and servants to the church in countries like Bangladesh, we must take responsibility for preventing our local brothers from falling into temptation by the way we disseminate our Western wealth. Do we set our financially-vulnerable local brothers up to fail morally when we tempt them with vast supplies of easy money and little insightful accountability? Paul declared, 'if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall' (1 Cor 8:13). In the same spirit could we not resolve to handle our Western money with utmost care so that it will not become a temptation to destroy our local brothers? We should strive to learn local patterns of handling finances and begin building our projects on such models, adapted to scripture. □