

Unintended Consequences

**The following article was written by
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www.calms.org.**

My co-worker Pastor Miguel and I talk regularly about “unintended consequences” as we plan and work with short-term teams and partners in Central America. Quite often we say to one another, “What do you think will be the unintended consequence of the action or decision we are about to take?”

Based on experience, we know that even after many years of working in Latin America, we as outsiders tend to think differently and sometimes fail to consider how one of our decisions might be perceived by a Central American leader and lead to a consequence far different from what we expected.

For example, our short-term teams often assume that our partners in Belize, Guatemala and Panama are too poor to give anything back to God. So the natural response is to offer to do things that the Central Americans can and should do for themselves.

I saw this tendency demonstrated a number of times on a recent visit to Panama. One example will hopefully illustrate my point. At a congregation with a primarily indigenous membership I noticed during the worship service that the paraments on the altar and pulpit were typical of those used in many congregations in North America. Sure enough, when I asked about this, I discovered that a congregation in the USA gave the paraments assuming that the Panamanian Christians were unable to provide for this need.

Since the Panama congregation had already been predisposed by missionaries and other US volunteers to think that things made and used in the USA are superior to things from Panama, they gladly received the paraments and began to use them. Sadly, this was all done in good faith without considering the unintended consequences.

Here’s the problem as I see it. American Christians have resources and see themselves as rich compared to Central American Christians. Central American Christians have some resources, and don’t see themselves as poor - until and unless - they develop a relationship with another outside group which has more and are willing to give something to help them meet their needs.

At this point, unintended consequences come into play. North American Christians sometimes begin to meet needs as they perceive them to be without asking for advice

from reliable cultural helpers. The unintended consequence for Central American Christians is that they begin to see themselves as unable to meet their own needs.

Of course, there are situations which call for a generous response on the part of North American Christians and where help is much needed. We saw an example in Guatemala this past summer when Tropical Storm Agatha destroyed the homes of hundreds of Guatemalans including those living near Gualan where CALMS is working.

Responding to the desperate needs of these people who were forced to move into relief shelters, CALMS' partner congregations in the United States and Guatemala helped finance and send teams to build flood relief homes. As reported in last month's e-letter, thanks to this response, we were able to build 36 houses in three months!

Amazingly, we also discovered that the very poor village of Campanario La Avanzada near La Union, Guatemala that was devastated by a comparable disaster in 2008 also responded without any prompting to this summer's disaster. From their relative poverty, they generously gave what they had - beans, tortillas, and tomatoes to help those who had lost their homes. Compared to other villages in other parts of Guatemala and to our North American partners, this village has very few resources, but they thankfully considered what they could do to help with the resources they had.

Our assumption as richer Christians could easily have led us to think that the people of Campanario La Avanzada could never help anyone else when in fact they had some resources to share. Such an assumption could lead us to make some unfortunate decisions that could in time cause the villagers to see themselves as unable to do anything to help others.

For example, what if instead of working with the villagers to help build a much-needed school annex in their village, CALMS had simply recruited US teams to do it without any involvement by the villagers? Would they have felt a sense of ownership and pride in their new school building? Would they have developed the existing system which involves village parents and older children taking turns to clean "their" building?

I refer again to the example shared above about the altar paraments in the Indian village in Panama. While the North American donors had very good intentions, they did not think about other options and the unintended consequences of the decision they made.

The option that was very obvious is the fact that these same people make beautiful textiles that they sell to make money to support their families. They even make beautiful stoles for pastors that are often purchased as gifts for North American pastors. Why did the North American Christians who gave the paraments not think to ask, "Is

this a gift that these people really need? Could they make paraments themselves, and if so, what would have been the result?

The unintended consequence of giving without thinking about the possible results, in this case produced a village that is struggling to overcome years of dependency. Even though they have no more resources than the villagers in Panama, the villagers in Guatemala mentioned earlier, recognize that they have resources to help themselves and others. Meanwhile, the Panama villagers have a tendency to think of themselves as poor. When they see a need, they tend to look for help from North Americans instead of seeing what they themselves are able to give.

The assumptions we make often lead to unintended consequences. They tell us something about the condition of our faith. If we believe something can be done with God's help, we will most likely proceed in faith on that basis.

Yours in God's Service,

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