

National vs. Missionary Wage

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It is a fact that in some mission fields nationals of the country with approximately the same academic preparation as an overseas missionary do approximately the same work as the missionary for considerably less pay. This practice raises questions. It also raises blood pressure. Young idealists in the United States and abroad tend to react with instant compassion for the victims, and hot-eyed indignation against the oppressors. Such reaction is understandable. But perhaps introducing a little light to go along with the heat will contribute to a solution of this complex and vexing problem.

Fair or not, services of any kind in one country are not paid for at the same rate as in another, as a few examples outside the mission field illustrate. The Canadian who comes to the United States for his college education and goes back home to work does not receive the same pay as his classmate — no better qualified — who works (either for the church or elsewhere) in the United States. The Britisher who studies in the United States and returns home is paid considerably less than a U. S. wage. Even within the United States there is not equal pay for equal service. The college graduate who starts teaching in the Middle West isn't paid California wages. Rightly or wrongly, regional economic differences do exist, and the differences are greater when the economies of developing countries are compared with the economy of the United States.

What really happens? The principal of an Adventist secondary school in America, let's say, takes a look at his budget. With his board, he decides how much tuition he can charge, without pricing his service out of the market. He knows how much subsidy he can expect from his local conference and/or his union conference. He knows pretty well what his fixed expenses will be. He balances all these factors, one against another, and decides what he can afford to pay his teachers. If it is less than can be paid in some more affluent region, with higher per capita income, he may have to

face such consequences as fewer or less qualified applicants. But basically, salary rates are determined on a local rather than a national level.

Much the same thing happens here in the Philippines. The typical church school, staffed entirely by Filipinos, must work out a realistic budget. The local mission (conference) officials, who are also all Filipinos, study their situation and set tuition and salary rates accordingly. They may appeal to the union mission for additional help. The union mission administrators (two out of the three union missions here are staffed entirely by Filipinos) look at their various and limited sources of income, and grant whatever operating subsidy they can afford. In countries like the Philippines, with over a hundred thousand members, the entire church program is 75-90 percent self-supporting. Because per capita income is low, tuition has to be low — and salaries are therefore low by American standards.

The same thing is true of a hospital. What the hospital can afford to pay the nurses depends on what the patients can afford to pay the hospital. And that bears little resemblance to what patients have to pay in United States hospitals. (This perhaps explains why scores of recent graduate nurses from the Philippines now practice their profession in the United States. It is hard to blame them. After an expensive education, much of their income helps educate younger brothers and sisters or support parents.)

The same process operates in determining the salary scale of other mission workers. In any church organization, the pay the preacher gets is at least indirectly tied to the number of tithe-paying converts he can win or shepherd. The local mission president (and all of them here are Filipinos) knows the tithe income from his membership. He knows about how much Ingathering income he can count on, and what his small share of funds from overseas is. He must budget accordingly. Again, most financial decisions are made by committees that are entirely or almost entirely national.

The manager of the Philippine Publishing House who wants to know what the going rate is for a linotype operator or a pressman can go to the appropriate government bureau in Manila and find out. He pays that rate, and then it is up to him to produce books and magazines at prices that are competitive. If he had to pay what a linotypist earns in the United States, his product would be priced far too high for local consumption.

Nevertheless, as I admitted at the beginning, a real problem does exist. The more highly trained the nationals become, the more qualified they are for posts of responsibility, the more abrasive the wage differential becomes — because the nationals are then working more closely, and more on terms of equality, with overseas missionaries whose incomes are a lot higher.

It is no longer possible to categorize jobs as of two kinds — those that a national can fill and those that call for a missionary. There are both Filipino and American college presidents, business managers, deans, department heads; there are both as union conference presidents and department heads; and there are both as doctors and other church personnel. And the wage differential isn't easy to explain or justify.

Incidentally, the wage problem is not a problem for the church alone. A few years ago a young Filipino engineering graduate at Stanford University told me he could expect a beginning salary of \$800 a month in America, but he would be lucky if he could get one-fourth of that, or 800 pesos, in the Philippines. Hence the much-talked-of "brain drain." Some well-trained professionals do return home and make a real contribution to their country and their people. But many remain abroad, Adventists as well as others, and for generally similar reasons. Or if they do return to their homelands, their stay is brief. I know five Filipino holders of doctoral degrees who were in Adventist educational work in the Philippines a few years ago but are now on the other side of the Pacific. Others who have earned advanced degrees abroad have never returned.

The headache comes when one tries to figure out what to do about the wage problem. The two possible solutions that come to mind would be (*a*) to pay the American less or (*b*) to pay the national more.

First, what about the possibility of paying the American less? (It should be mentioned here, however, that *this* is not what most nationals want — especially those now in America. They want to come up to the American standard, not see missionaries drop to theirs.) In the Philippines the missionary already takes a cut of 20-25 percent from what he would be getting if he were working for the church in the United States. In fact, one recent ten-year study made in a neighboring division conference revealed that the overall cost of supporting an overseas church worker averages out about the same as the cost of a worker in the homeland. In other words, his salary is enough less than that of his counterpart in America to cover the cost of his travel, outfitting, and other allowances, the educational travel of his children, and furlough. Reducing it still further might well complicate the already difficult problem of recruiting overseas workers.

Whether an American *could* live on a national salary without damage to his or his family's physical or mental health is probably not the question so much as whether he *would*. The national Adventist church college teacher, for instance, has a substantial home, with electricity, indoor plumbing, usually a refrigerator, and a piano. His home is comfortably but not ele-

gantly furnished; he can give his family an adequate diet; and, with generous educational benefits, his children can have a Christian education. Since his wife probably teaches too, he has one or more helpers in the home. He may drive a used car, but he can't afford to change models every year. The revolution of rising expectations is what really hits him.

What would the national worker get outside the church? Elementary and secondary teachers in the church system earn salaries comparable to, or more than, what they would receive elsewhere. The same is true of Adventist college teachers on the instructor and assistant professor levels. For teachers with advanced degrees, on the other hand, it is different. The Adventist college salary structure is — rightly or wrongly — much more “communistic” than that prevailing in the educational world generally, at least here. There is a relatively narrow span between the salary of the lowest and the highest paid church employee. Outside the church's educational system, the higher salary brackets are *much* higher than the lower ones. Thus the national Adventist college teachers with doctorates don't get the local going rate for people with their qualifications.

This raises another perplexing question. Should what one could earn outside the church determine what the church pays him? It generally does not in America, and we tend to think it should not overseas. But perhaps we need to change our thinking. Perhaps the solution lies in the second alternative — raising the national salaries to bring them more in line, both with the local average in the top brackets and with the overseas salary scale.

The problem would then be where to get the money. One may well ask how non-Adventist schools manage to pay more. In the Philippines they usually do this by giving the teachers what we at our college would call impossible overloads. Twenty-five to thirty hours of teaching a week, even on the graduate level, is not unheard of. Some time ago the Philippine government passed a regulation that full-time government employees, such as senators and congressmen, bureau chiefs, judges, commission heads, etc., were prohibited from teaching more than fifteen hours a week in their spare time. In the Adventist college here, on the other hand, we like to think of fifteen hours a week as about the maximum load for a college teacher, if he is going to do respectable college-level work. Professors in other schools seldom protest the overloads, since they are typically paid on a per-hour basis; the more classes they handle, the more they make.

If we want to maintain high scholastic standards, the funds for increasing the salaries of professors will have to come from some source other than tuition income, or the number of employees will have to be proportionately

reduced. (It should be understood that salaries for missionaries do not come from local income but from the church in the United States; the services of the missionary constitute a subsidy to the institution he serves.)

Perhaps a larger share of overseas funds should be channeled into the salary pool for qualified nationals. The trend has been to use overseas funds largely for capital improvements, leaving operating costs to be borne primarily by the local fields. In today's unstable, unpredictable political climate, no one can tell when foreign support to any field will be sharply curtailed or totally cut off. Enterprises that have become heavily dependent on outside funds may then face collapse, whereas those locally supported will be more likely to survive.

A possible solution is to reduce the size of the overseas staff and use the same funds to raise the salaries of national workers. In some places such a reduction has been going on steadily. The enrollment at Philippine Union College the first full year I was here, shortly after the war, was about 160. We had more missionaries on our faculty at that time than we do now when we have more than ten times as many college students, and a graduate school added. But with only two Filipinos left who hold doctorates, we feel badly understaffed.

Wherever the funds might come from, if salaries in the top brackets were raised, the question would remain: who gets the increases? Should the deciding factor be the country where the doctorate was earned? how long the holder had lived abroad? or whether the school gave substantial support during the period of study? The college is now subsidizing the doctoral study of several teachers abroad, and three members of the college faculty are nearing completion of their doctoral work locally. Should all of these be on the same salary scale? (Nurses who should know tell me it is harder to get the master's degree in nursing from the University of the Philippines than from Loma Linda University.) Although we agree that some degrees from overseas universities are essential, we would not want to create a situation where those locally earned are in any way downgraded.

I don't claim to have the answers. I hold no administrative responsibility involving financial decisions and sit on no policy-making boards. Some may think that those in positions of authority have not only closed their minds to the problem but are sitting on the lids. Not so. They are struggling with it. No one I know is fully convinced that the status quo is the only solution or even the best one. But it will take more than instant compassion and hot-eyed indignation — though these may help — to find the right answer.