

Non-residential Missionaries and National Equipping

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Introduction

A non-residential missionary (NRM) is a person who is not a long-term resident of his/her field of focus but has a long-term commitment. For example, for church planters, long term commitment is to mentor/serve as long as is needed for a sustained church planting movement. What we do not mean by NRM is an individual who travels from place to place only to preach or be involved in onetime events, or events that do not build longer-term Christ-centered relationships.

Why the need for NRM, specifically as related to equipping nationals? In the remaining unevangelized parts of the world, it is often impossible for a long-term, conventional missionary to work as he would have done in the past. The NRM is able to enter and exit restricted access regions relatively unhindered, often traveling on a tourist visa – especially for those who are bi-vocational. Many such places already have at least a few national believers, and a NRM missionary can help equip them to reach their own people. It normally takes much less time for a national believer to learn how to plant churches than long-term missionaries, as he already knows the local language and culture. These factors make the NRM an effective, often preferable, option for equipping nationals for Great Commission work.

We currently work as NRMs, residing in the United States and travelling to South Asia every four to six weeks, staying four to six weeks per trip. We were initially introduced to Sharma (name has been changed) in 2004 by a mutual friend. Sharma is the person of peace in his field and had a vision to reach his people. At his request, we began to work closely with Sharma in 2005 to mentor him as he seeks to achieve a house church planting movement among his people.

Some Helpful Guidelines for Non-Residential Mission Work:

1. The NRM should understand that he does not own the work in the field – it belongs to the nationals. The NRM should not go uninvited to work with an existing national church, but only at the request of the national. He should work under the authority of the national leadership. His job is to help equip the nationals to do the work through mentoring and training. He should focus on the area at the national's invitation.
2. The NRM must have a clear objective. For instance, assisting in the establishment of a church planting movement. Without a clear objective, it is impossible to gauge the effectiveness of the NRM's efforts, the nationals' work, or the methods used.

3. The NRM has a time-specific exit strategy. He understands that any leadership he exercises must be passed on to the nationals completely within a reasonable time. His aim is to work himself out of a job. Initially, the time spent in-country may be frequent as intense training and mentoring is required. However, the need for the NRM's mentoring will diminish as national leadership matures. Eventually, the relationship between the NRM and the nationals will evolve to the point where the NRM visits sporadically and provides input via e-mails and phone calls at the national's request.

4. The NRM must be adept in cultural issues. Since the NRM is not of the culture he is working with, he must gain a good, practical grasp of this culture. In some cases, the NRM may need to train the nationals to communicate the gospel in a culturally relevant way, especially if the nationals are multi-generational believers without an understanding of how the "unbelieving culture" operates. For example, many national believers are taught, within the Christendom they know, to stand when saying something important. However, in their culture, the appropriate posture when saying something important may be to sit down. Being so immersed in "Christendom" for generations, it does not occur to them that a more culturally relevant form exists. On the other hand, when they receive cultural training, issues like this can be a major epiphany and become obvious. It is important for the NRM to have a trusted individual of that culture to assist him with cultural issues and understandings.

5. Given the NRM's transient nature, learning the local language may not be possible or necessary. Therefore, a common language or a skilled national interpreter is usually required, one who is adept in both the NRM's language and the local language. A NRM may have a specific focus or limited objective, for which learning the language is secondary.

6. The NRM's job is to work with leadership and not necessarily with grassroots individuals. Therefore, the national leadership must be self-motivated with a clear vision to reach and serve their people. Without a clear vision to multiply churches, any efforts by the NRM will be marginal at best. Finding a "person of peace" in the leadership for the NRM to work with is critical. This is a person with a clear vision to reach the people at any cost. The NRM is then able to come alongside this individual to facilitate a church planting movement. In our case, we were introduced to such a person and spent a great amount of time helping him hone and clarify his vision, and developing a plan to achieve it.

7. A reporting system must be in place so the NRM can verify work is actually being done. This requires focusing on specific tasks and outcomes. Some use a simple progress chart listing ministries that the New Testament requires churches to do, and other vital activities of regional coordinators and church planters. For example, in our situation, we helped the local leadership do “backwards” planning. This involved a fixed specific target, the number of house churches that would be established within 5 years. Then we stepped backwards and analyzed intermediate objectives for each year, and down to quarterly objectives. We provided progress charts to measure specific areas of growth and maturity. A NRM needs to have in place some kind of reporting system for quantitative and qualitative measurement.

8. Time spent in-country must focus on relationships and not just accomplishing tasks. This requires training meetings with larger groups coupled with smaller group mentoring when the NRM is in-country, and close involvement with the nationals. Often, informal times together are the most productive. For instance, when we are in-country, there are times that we spend time with the nationals just being together – living life. This has served as a significant model of what a church is and how she functions. It is a time of intensive relationship building. It is incumbent on the NRM to be willing to live in whatever conditions he may find himself with the nationals. This involvement helps deepen and maintain the relationship while the NRM is not in-country.

Some BENEFITS of Non-residential Mission Work:

1. An NRM, by being absent much of the time, encourages nationals to take up work and leadership immediately. The NRM is not there to do the grassroots work, nor is it his job to lead the people. His job is to mentor the current leadership regardless of their level and help them become established, grow as leaders and mobilize other national leaders. This model by-passes the awkward problem of a foreign missionary passing leadership on to national leaders.

2. Being an NRM often makes it easier to tell if work is actually being done. Once workers have planned specific tasks and defined expected outcomes, it is easy to measure the work achieved. Also, since the NRM is not so involved in the field work, he can avoid failing to “see the forest for the trees.” In our situation, returning back to our home country has provided the ability to step back and see the situation from a different viewpoint. However, because we return to the field on a regular basis, we are still involved enough to have a good understanding of the fieldwork. Being in-and-out has enabled us to be more effective in what we are doing.

3. Time that is spent in-country is more focused. Since the nationals know that the NRM is only in-country for a limited time, schedules are arranged to maximize the use of his time.

4. Costs are low. While the expense of flying roundtrip multiple times a year can be significant, it is still considerably lower normally than the cost of maintaining a resident missionary.

Some Possible Concerns of Non-residential Mission Work:

1 . New national workers may lose focus and relationships may suffer. Since the NRM is not full-time in-country, it can be difficult to maintain working relationships. However, the use of mobile phones and Internet has done much to alleviate this problem. The NRM needs to be proactive in this area as the cost of calling overseas may be financially difficult for the national.

2. Missionaries sometimes do not take the time to become "fully" involved with the local context. This is a mistake that can be easy to make since the NRM may feel that he is only there for a short time on any trip. However, his longer term perspective should drive the NRM to become fully involved. (See #8 in Guidelines above). For example, we have taken it upon ourselves to learn about the game of cricket, a popular sport in the country where we work. We watch it with our co-laborers and discuss it. This is important because it is one of the significant “experiences” that bonds the entire country together regardless of differences – even extreme ones.

Since our involvement with Sharma in 2005, we have seen him grow from a house church leader to now the mission secretary of his field. Through our relationship and mentoring, he has grown confident in being able to train his people instead of requesting us to do the training. We continue to work closely with Sharma, helping him troubleshoot areas in the movement that needs adjustment and correction. We believe this field is on the cusp of a house church planting movement. It is our desire to “work ourselves out of a job” by 2012.

**Published, “Featured Articles” in the October 2009 issue of the online journal
www.GlobalMissiology.org**