

The Schlelein Family

Missionaries to the Tsongas of southern Africa

AUGUST 2013 | LIMPOPO, SOUTH AFRICA

A Few Reasons We Don't Buy Our Rural Church a Building (and neither should you)

A wise man once said, knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is not putting it in the fruit salad. In relation to missions, knowledge is knowing that Africans are generally poor and in need. Wisdom is not putting money directly into their pockets.

We left the richest nation in the history of civilization to plant a church in a village where cooking over an open fire is the norm, river beds are piled high with dirty, disposable diapers, and the unemployment rate is higher than President Zuma's approval ratings. Scripture is clear that Christians have a responsibility to give (2 Cor. 9:7) and to help the poor (Luke 10:30-37), especially fellow Christians (Gal. 6:10). So how does a missionary go about a building project for his poor church?

For the past year, we've spent hundreds of hours with our people laying brick, mixing concrete, digging holes, and clearing brush—with little foreign aid. An African pastor once told me that foreign missionaries should at least construct a building for their church, then leave the rest up to the people. Here are a few reasons we do not do this.

1. Foreign funds often create dependence and foster laziness not personal responsibility.
2. Overall, foreign aid does not work. USAID gives billions to Africa but the continent is still mired in poverty.
3. Missionaries should be wildly generous in their giving, but in more clandestine ways. For example, the missionary may decide to buy hammers and picks and shovels for the work project, but Kojo knows he still must be ready to work at 7 AM.
4. Unwise foreign giving feeds the message of the Prosperity Gospel that large, ornate structures are always a sign of God's blessing.
5. The missionary who works *alongside* his congregation is teaching them character and hard work and enlivens more credibility in his preaching.
6. The experience gained by church members in building for themselves gives them skill for future projects.
7. For an example of our missions philosophy from a secular perspective, read Booker T. Washington's classic [*Up From Slavery*](#). It is required reading for LBI students.
8. A church built by American funds creates an unrealistic pattern for the future indigenous church and pastor.
9. It proves difficult for a missionary to teach his people the importance of generous and sacrificial giving as they rest in pews built not with their own sweat or giving.
10. The "stare factor". We all know this rule. We bake a pie, build a shed, or cut our lawn, then stand back and admire our work. I have seen our congregation do this on countless occasions. Not so had the church been built for free.

Please pray we'll be wise as we strive to give in generous and furtive ways to our congregation that aims to grow for the glory of God.

For an eternal perspective,
The Schlelein Six