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Earning Commissions on 'The Great Commission'

By **ROB MOLL**

Christian missionaries have always brought institutions from home and planted them in foreign lands. Schools, hospitals and social services are staples of missionary activity. But recently those who spread the faith overseas have realized that it's not enough to educate and provide health care. In the midst of a world-wide recession, people need jobs, and a growing number of missionaries—many of them working outside traditional missionary organizations—are taking their business skills and starting for-profit companies in the mission fields.

Missionary activity is in decline because of the recession. The Southern Baptist Convention and the United Methodist Church, two of the largest Protestant denominations, are making steep cuts to their missionary institutions. Yet Jesus' command to disciple all nations still pulls strongly on the hearts of many Christians. While mission agencies are tightening their purse strings, many business owners are turning to their practical, 9-to-5 skills to help fulfill this Great Commission.

The Business as Mission movement began in the 1990s, when globalization allowed Christian business people to build companies overseas. Often they did so without the help of churches. This missions model required some initial capital but no long-term subsidies. Business missionaries could become integral parts of a community, build trust with locals through business relationships, and minister every day of the week—not just Sunday—to employees, vendors, suppliers and customers. In the late '90s Neal Johnson was at Fuller Seminary in California planning a career change. He'd worked overseas in banking and law for decades, and he wanted to combine his business skills with missionary work. But his initial dissertation proposal on business as mission was rejected. "I was told it was not a subject for someone pursuing a Ph.D.," he said. Eventually, the committee relented. Today, Mr. Johnson is the dean of the business school at Bakke Graduate University—an international Christian school based in Seattle but offering courses from Hong Kong to Hungary—whose business program focuses solely on training students to integrate faith and missions with business. When I spoke with him, he was teaching an MBA course in the Philippines.

In the past decade, the movement has exploded, at least in interest among missionary agencies. Steve Rundle, an economics professor at Biola University in California, has been studying business as mission for 15 years. Prof. Rundle says that much of the movement is still informal, led by individual entrepreneurs. Because many business owners work outside of traditional mission agencies, it can be hard to quantify their numbers. But surveys of U.S.-based agencies found that about 5% of their missionaries are working in business, up from almost nothing 20 years ago. At a handful of agencies, as many as a quarter are using business as mission principles of profitability, the production of marketable goods and services and integration of Christianity and evangelism into the business.

Dwight Martin is the founder of Pac Tec Asia Co. Ltd., a data-processing company in Thailand. Mr. Martin employs Buddhists and Christians in his seven-person company. His revenue is split between work for Western Christian and non-Christian companies. He creates digital libraries for customers who ship him paper documents, and he uses the profits to build digital libraries of Bibles, commentaries and other Christian books for pastors and teachers in Thailand.

So what does success mean for a business mission? "I measure success a couple of ways," says Mr. Martin. "One is how much profit I have to give toward ministry. How many pastors buy our flash drive [with digital libraries] and how many people are using our Web resources." Beyond that, Mr. Martin says, "I can talk about Buddhist employees who show an interest in Christianity. I see changed lives."

Faith-at-work movements have been popular at least since the 1857 businessmen's revival in New York City, in which noon-hour prayer meetings were so full of the city's professionals that many businesses closed during the gatherings. But churches have typically kept business people at a distance, needing their money but questioning their spiritual depth. With the business as mission movement, that has changed. In 2004, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism, founded by Billy Graham, featured a track on business as mission. At a recent missionary conference in Hong Kong, Doug Seebeck says mission leaders apologized to the business people present. They had been guilty of asking for their money while keeping them in the foyer of the church, outside of the sanctuary.

Mr. Seebeck is executive director of Partners Worldwide, a Michigan organization that provides mentoring relationships for business owners in the developing world by connecting them with business people in the U.S. Mr. Seebeck was a missionary in Bangladesh and Africa for nearly 20 years, but he saw the limitations of all the good work church people did. Now Mr. Seebeck says, "Business is the greatest hope for the world's poor." He sees business profits as consistent with God's purpose for humans. Profits, unlike activities that are donor dependent, are sustainable. Making a profit, he argues, is a better stewardship of God's resources than pleading for funds, spending them, and going back for more.

While advanced economies question capitalism, Christians who work in developing countries see how essential business is to provide jobs and health care, build communities and even minister to souls. For these business owners, a desk job overseas has become a full-time ministry.

—Mr. Moll is author of the forthcoming book "The Art of Dying: Living Fully Into the Life to Come," to be published by InterVarsity Press.

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