

For six years, I didn't earn my pay. God gave it to me.

LIVING ON GIVING

By Ken Sidey

God's will for my life arrived on the 10th of every month in a blue business envelope. I'd open it and walk my fingers past the paycheck, newsletter, and brochures to a four-page computer printout that charted the past, mapped the present, and gave me a glimpse of the future. Like everyone else in the large missions organization where I worked as a writer, I was responsible to develop a team of individuals and churches to support me financially.

Living on donations contradicts the American ideal and the Protestant work ethic.

The economics were simple. Those donations were my sole source of income. The money went into my support account, from which my paycheck and ministry expenses were paid. The printout showed my account's balance and the amount each of my donors had given for the past 13 months.

Perhaps it's a bit much to call that report God's will for my life. After all, it revealed only names and numbers. Still, it touched almost everything I did and reached deep into my faith.

At the least, those pages created a lengthy "to do" list. Communicating with my supporters was an important part of my commitment to them, so every four to six weeks I mailed 150 letters to update them on my life and work.

Even for a writer, preparing those letters was a constant chore. So constant, in fact, that my first date with my wife-to-be included a couple of hours of addressing envelopes. Not the most romantic activity, but she understood. As a staff member of the same ministry, she had supporters, too. When we married, our lists became as one - only twice as long.

There were extra thank-yous to be sent for extra gifts and cards for special occasions. And there were those delicate letters or phone calls to ask a supporter why a line of zeros was growing next to his name on my printout.

If my account stayed too low for too long, I packed my bags for a visit back home. Unlike the government, I couldn't spend what I didn't have. Either I found new team members or more funds from those already giving, or my paycheck shrank into oblivion.

"What's it like to live on support?" people have asked. I wonder what they want to hear. The positives? The negatives? I usually hedge with vague words like "interesting" or "different" until I can read their intentions.

Thousands of missionaries at home and overseas are supported just as I was. I've known dozens, talked to scores. Each one's experience is different: encouraging, exasperating, satisfying, humbling. I can give only glimpses.

When people ask "What's it like?" I think they're also asking "Why do you do it?" Not because it seems so difficult, but because it's so different.

Living on donations contradicts the American ideal and the Protestant work ethic. It flaunts the maxims of the day: Be independent. Work hard. Climb the ladder. Get ahead. God helps those who help themselves.

Why did I do it? God wanted me to. Through that mysterious process of "calling," He directed me to professional Christian work. Through Scripture and counsel and evaluation and gut feeling, I knew He wanted me to use my writing talent to serve Him with a missionary organization, and living on support was an unavoidable part of obeying that call.

The initial deputation was like an entrance exam. It tested how serious I was about following God's call. If I wanted in, I had to pass. (Not that "full-time" Christian workers labor on a higher plane. It didn't take special faith, just faith applied to a special circumstance.)

My rookie enthusiasm ran high. It carried me through more than 500 phone calls, to more than a dozen churches, and past several interrogations on doctrine, financial disclosure, and personal history. In 10 weeks I was on my way to my assignment.

I had friends who sought their support for a year or more; some finally made it, some finally quit. I can't say they were slow or that they failed. Perhaps God had different lessons to teach them.

After my initial two-year commitment became three years, then four, the course got tougher. The 'examination' never stopped.

My team constantly needed replacements. Age, sickness, and lagging economies shortened my roster.

"How long are you going to stay with this?" "You've been there long enough, shouldn't they start paying you?" "When are you going to get a real job?" I married. Our daughter was born. Was I providing for my family? How much security did they deserve and need?

I watched friends establish careers, save money, buy houses, and collect luxuries. My low, uncertain salary made that "successful" lifestyle unreachable. But it wasn't gone from view.

I wish I could say I mastered contentment or the joy of simplicity. But I sometimes felt a twinge of resentment when I sat in a family's new home, was shown the color television the children just received for Christmas, and was told they just couldn't afford to support me with even \$10 a month.

Sometimes I'd feel a burn of defensive anger when I was verbally flogged for some "sin" of my organization. Or I'd give an inner sigh of disappointment when I wrote off a supporter as missing in action: no money, no explanation, and no forwarding address.

Those were difficult feelings, and hard to avoid. They were repeated, with variation, more than I wish were true.

As the years went by, with every notice of a low balance or a dropped supporter, it got easier to ask God, "Is this lack of support Your way of telling me my work here is finished? Is it time to leave?"

But when my vision focused on the things I didn't have or on the negative numbers on my balance sheet, God never failed to raise my sights to Him - sometimes with a forceful tug, sometimes a gentle touch.

Often I needed only to lift my eyes a few lines from the zeros to a solid row of 10s or 20s, the record of a supporter who steadily, faithfully and consistently gave, never missing a month and sending extra for Christmas or a special need. My wife and I had many like that who sustained us without fanfare and ministered to us with their constancy. In my six years and my wife's 10 years on support, we never lacked what we truly needed.

We discovered no pat formulas, no guarantees for bringing in support. Those we thought surely could give substantially gave nothing at all; those who couldn't, did. With letters and visits, we did our part, but the provision was in God's hands, and His alone.

How else can I explain our printout for April 1982, when a church's unexpected gift of \$1,500 arrived just in time to cover equally unexpected bills of \$1,000? How else can I explain the gracious generosity of a woman my wife met only once for 30 minutes? Her gifts increased every year for eight years until she was giving \$125 a month at the time we left our supported work a year and a half ago. Why did we leave? God wanted us to. He had a new set of exam questions with which to teach us.

I'd like to think we passed the support test, that we learned the lesson God had there: Trust Him. In the area of life that's so foreign to faith, where self-sufficiency is demanded by the world, we trusted God.

The dollars were His gift of stewardship to us. The people were His gift of love.

I sat in the basement of an Iowa country church, sharing tea, cookies, and conversation with the dozen people who had come on a

summer Sunday evening to hear my ministry report. The small group was half the congregation; most were already supporters.

The farmer sitting across the table from me turned a styrofoam cup slowly in his thick, rough hands. He had supported me steadily for a year - a hard year. I knew the dollars could have easily gone to his family and farm, but every month they came to me.

Yet the money meant nothing right then. Tears came to his eyes and his sentence faltered as he remembered his nine-year-old daughter, who had died of cancer five months before. The loss was painfully fresh to him. With the insulation of distance stripped away, I felt it, too.

I recalled meeting her: a thin, tired little girl with dark hair, sleeping on the couch during one of my earlier visits to their home.

For a few moments, the differences of job and place and roles were gone, and we grieved together.

The conversation returned and moved on; other parishioners came and went. As I walked to my car in the twilight, the farmer called to me and joined me as I waited. "Ken, I meant to tell you downstairs. We want to raise our support by \$10 a month. God's been good to us this year. I hope that helps."

I punctuated my thank-you for the always needed dollars with a handshake, then exited into my car. As I drove home, my jaw tightened and my eyes blurred at the thought of what that \$10 really meant, of a value that made dollar amounts ridiculous.

Did I earn my pay during those six years? I worked 40 hours or more a week, if that's what *earn* implies. But no, I didn't earn my pay. God gave it to me. He gave me the dollars, and He gave me the people.

I get a regular paycheck now. It arrives, alone in an envelope, on the last workday of every month. Do I earn it? No, it's God's provision, just the same. And sometimes, when I'm tempted to take it for granted, I wish there were some kind of printout in that envelope to remind me of His people, to remind me of His gift. ■

I would sigh
with disappointment
as I wrote
off a supporter
as missing in
action: no
money, no
explanation,
and no forward-
ing address.