

Fighting Dependency Among the "Aucas"

An Interview with Steve Saint

by Rick Wood

In 1956, Nate Saint, father of Steve Saint, and four other young missionaries (Jim Elliott, Pete Fleming, Ed McCulley, and Roger Youderian) were speared to death while trying to reach the "Auca" Indians (more properly called Huaorani) in the jungles of Ecuador. Today, Steve Saint is helping them to break free from the stifling dependency created by outsiders which threatens their survival as a people. I talked with him recently.

MF: When did you first realize that there was a problem with dependency that was being created by missionaries bringing the Gospel to the Huaorani?

Steve: It was a growing awareness, but it really hit me in 1995 when we went to live with the Huaorani. It became reality in a new way, because then we were living with them and we felt it too. After being a businessman for years and used to being independent, to suddenly need other people to the point where they realized, too, that we were depending on them was very uncomfortable.

After Aunt Rachel died in 1994, the Huaorani asked me to bring my family and come live with them. I saw the dependency problem even then. That was one of the main reasons why I didn't want to go. I could see how many people had been paying attention to them because of "The Auca Story." In spite of this, I think their experience with dependency is fairly typical of other peoples which makes them a good case study.

MF: What was it that helped you see that these people had become dependant?

Steve: What struck me was when I asked the people why they wanted me to come. They named three things. First they said, "Help us get medicine." I responded, "There is a hospital and you can go there to get medicine." They said, "Yes, but how do we get there?" And when our people get there, they can take care of the body, but nobody can explain to them God's trail. But if we take care of them here, we can teach our people how to follow God's trail." They wanted to use medicine as a means to evangelize. That's where mission medicine started out, not as an end in itself, but as a means.

Their second request was, "Help teach us." As we got down there, we learned that they wanted me to teach them how to deal with the outside world, because they trusted me. They realized that they needed to know how things work in the outside world so they could deal with outsiders without always being taken advantage of. And that led into their third request.

They said, "Help protect us." I thought they were needing protection mostly from insensitive government agencies and oil companies who were exploiting their land. This is painful and hard to say because there are many people who have committed years of their lives to helping the Huaorani, but their need for protection from the overbearing, over-indulging outside Christian community was as great a need for protection as anything else. This is from the standpoint of the Huaorani believers.

MF: In a recent article in Christianity Today, you mentioned that the Huaorani Church you encountered in the 1990's was less functional than the one you saw in the early 1960's. What led you to this conclusion?

Steve: Let me give you a couple of illustrations. About three years after Aunt Rachel started living with the Huaorani, before the very first Gospel of Mark was presented to them, I remember the Huaorani leaving the church services and talking to each other about what Aunt Rachel and her friend, Dayuma, had taught them of God's Word.

Shortly after that, Inihua, a friend that I was baptized with in Huao territory by some of the Huao elders, went with a couple of his friends to kill a witchdoctor who they thought had put a curse on someone. When they got there, the witchdoctor wasn't around so they speared his son. The son begged them to call the Mission Aviation Fellowship plane to take him to a doctor, but they just left him to die.

Then the elders, or the more mature believers, got together to discuss what they should do. But they just couldn't decide. One of the men who had sons that had gone with Inihua said, "We've got to go kill them, because if we don't, then this thing will spread, and even the believers will start living badly." Someone else said, "No, we can't kill them because God's Carvings say we shouldn't kill. We've left that behind. We can't start all that again." Finally, their decision was to pray and ask God to discipline them.

A couple of days after they began to pray, Inihua died under very mysterious circumstances. He was afraid to come back to the village so he and a couple of friends stayed over on the Curaray River, where Dad and his friends were killed. That night as they were cooking their evening meal, Inihua who was up on a bank over the river, jumped backwards down onto the beach, right by the river. The other kids thought he was just toying with them but when he didn't come back up the bank, they went down and discovered Inihua in the process of having a seizure. He was foaming at the mouth and died later.

When Aunt Rachel found out about it, she called the symptoms in to the doctor at the hospital. She was worried that this might be the beginning of some kind of epidemic. But the symptoms didn't fit anything and nobody else got sick. For the Huaorani elders, they had their answer. God had disciplined Inihua. And it brought the fear of God on people, both believers and non-believers. Now that's the kind of thing that I saw when I was an early teenager.

When I went down in my mid-forties, thirty years later, I checked around to see what was going on. When the Huaorani would say, "Help us do this," I would ask, "What are you doing about it?" But they weren't doing anything. They had become spectators. I realized that instead of having Bible conferences, where the ones who knew the Scriptures could teach others, they were just waiting because every once in a while, whenever they felt like it, outsiders would come in and hold a conference. The outsiders would bring rice and sugar, and it would be a big festive occasion. But the Huaorani couldn't afford rice and they couldn't get sugar, so they figured this is something that the outsiders do. So they never have a Bible conference of their own.

A work team came down and built them a nice church (by Huaorani standards) in the village where Aunt Rachel lived, with concrete posts for a foundation, a board floor and walls with a tin roof. From the time that they built that (probably nineteen years ago) the Huaorani, to my knowledge, have never built another building to be used for a place of worship. When I asked them why, they said, "Oh, the outsiders build churches." And I said, "But, in Tiwaeno you built the church" They replied, "But we can only build like the ancient ones did," meaning with thatch. So I said, "God would be happy with thatch. He lived in a tent with the Children of Israel." That was a new thought to them. They assumed the outsiders didn't think what they were doing was adequate, so the outsiders came in and showed them what to do. So they thought, "We can't build like that, so we should leave that for the outsiders to do."

It's that kind of thing. They were not intentionally creating dependency, but people come in with good intentions to do things, not understanding the context in which they're doing them. This undermines the churches and the initiative of the people.

MF: What other examples can you give us where well-meaning missionaries have created dependency among the Huaorani?

Steve: There was one situation in Nemompade, where the Huaorani built a centrally located little center with an airstrip so they could build a clinic. We are working towards getting a radio station there so

they can broadcast in the Huaorani language. They have no mail service, no regular courier or message service, and there is no broadcasting in their language. In building this little center they were concerned about educating their children. The education is dominated by temporary teachers who come in from the outside. Most of them are non-believers who look down on the Huaorani. They don't know the Huaorani culture or the Huaorani language. They come in to do a couple years of rural practice to get their credentials and then they teach outside.

The Huaorani said, "If we are going to do these things, we need to have our children taught by Huaoranis. How can we do that?" I said, "If you're going to control the education, the first thing is to build a school and support it yourself." They had no economy, but they replied, "You tell us how we can make money and we will work. We'll do it." We soon had the school up and running with Huaorani teachers. They started doing tours as the way to support things like this.

One day I was out at the airstrip when I saw a young outsider who works under the auspices of a North American missionary. I was surprised to see him, because I had no idea that he was going to be in our area. He jumped on an MAF plane that had just brought in some folks and took off.

I asked the Huaorani, "What was he doing here?" They said, "Oh, he came by trail and went into school and was getting the kids to write a message on a piece of paper." I said, "But class was in session." They said, "Yes." But he just came in, stopped school and said to the kids who were signed up with a child sponsorship program, "All of you kids that are signed up, you have to copy this message." He went to the blackboard, erased what the teacher had written, wrote the message and said, "Okay, copy this quickly, because the airplane is coming." The kids that didn't belong felt left out. There's no distinction in the economic background or ability of the parents of these kids. Some were signed up, and some of them were not, even though none of them were orphans or hungry.

So the kids who were part of this started madly trying to copy this thank-you letter that somebody had dictated for them on the board. They got about two-thirds done when the plane came and the man said, "You were too slow. You're going to have to write it and then bring it up to Tonampade," which is a full day's walk by trail. And he ran out and got on the plane.

By the time I got to the Huaorani, they were so angry and frustrated they didn't know what to do because the kids who weren't part of this "deal" had it pointed out to them, "Hey, you guys are second-class citizens. Come Christmas you're not going to get any presents because you haven't signed up." So I asked them what they thought about this and they said, "We say it isn't good for our children to get things from outsiders that we, ourselves, can't give them." One of the things they pointed out was, "At Christmas, these chosen kids will all get a new blanket, but their parents won't have any, and these other kids won't have any blankets either." They were saying that this was going to create jealousy.

Finally when the toys and blankets came, they were delivered to our house. The people said to me, "We don't want them, because it will make people angry."

Those brand new blankets that they would have loved to have had just sat there for months. Nobody touched them. You can't imagine the tension of people coming into a house seeing a whole stack of new blankets and knowing that they're designated only for certain ones. That's the situation that I had to live with for months, as those blankets sat there and gathered dust and mildew. They just couldn't think of an equitable way to distribute them.

It got to the point where the Huaorani finally asked this individual not to come into the community. They wanted to have and support their own school and they didn't want these certain kids participating in things that created jealousy and animosity.

A couple of weeks later, letters came addressed to all these kids, asking them to tell their parents that if they continued to go to the Huaorani school that they would never qualify for scholarships, go to camp,

or be able to leave the territory and explore the big, wide wonderful world.

Somebody was writing to the kids, having them tell their parents that they had to go back to the highly subsidized and controlled schools. Can you imagine?

That is just the tip of the iceberg of the things I saw there. I had to help pick up the pieces and live through the agony with them.

MF: Are there certain factors over those thirty years that you can point to that was key in the process of creating dependency?

Steve: I think there are a number of keys, not just one. It's insidious. Look at what has happened with the Native Americans. If you read National Geographic Magazine, you see example after example of what happens when a more advanced culture with a superior education, technology, and economic ability comes in contact with another culture. In almost every case, the advanced culture ends up dominating, because the technologically inferior culture wants to emulate the more sophisticated culture, but they don't have the tools that make them sophisticated.

Looking at a mission situation in a frontier area, the missionaries or outside Christians control the communications, transportation, medicine, and the purse strings, especially if there's no economy inside. These are the primary elements that industrial nations are built on. Without expertise in these areas you can imagine how a frontier people will react. Not only is it humiliating for them, but they lose all motivation to do anything.

That's what has happened to the Huaorani. They have become spectators because they see that these outsiders can do it much better. But the lie is that the outsiders don't do it much better. They just have more of the tools to do it. But the tools are just the means. The goal is to get the message to the people in an understandable form. And that's something that outsiders can never do as well as the Huaorani believers.

MF: How can missionaries working with indigenous peoples like the Huaorani help prepare them for contact with the outside world and not bring in their own culture as a result?

Steve: Whenever missionaries come in, the people already have contact with the outside world. My conclusion is that it's impossible, except in very rare cases, for anybody to completely strip themselves of one culture in order to enter into another one. Whenever anybody comes in "missionaries, anyone" a process of change in the culture is already begun.

Looking at it realistically and practically, cultures are always changing. The question is not does it change, but how does it change, and how fast does it change? Even more important, who is in charge of that change? Is it outsiders who comes in to dominate, or is it the people themselves?

Here, I think, it's critical that we keep sight of what the purpose of missions is. Missions is not to go in and create and control a church for other people nor be the church for them. It's not our job to insure that it functions. It is simply and only to plant the church in every people group and nurture it until it is able to propagate, govern and support itself.

When missions go beyond that, then they are imposing themselves in the area of responsibility that belongs to the indigenous people and then everything gets out of whack.

I don't get this from books on missiology, but just from the Scriptures. In Matt. 28, Jesus said, "All authority has been given to Me. You go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations."

He was talking to eleven uneducated, unprepared men, sending them out to make disciples, who would teach other people to follow Him on their own, observing all that He had commanded them.

This means that the Huaorani believers need to be discipled so that they can make disciples also. But if

they're not given the chance to do that, if other people dominate them and keep doing the things that the Huaorani should do, then they never grow up.

MF: What changes do you think should be made now in order to foster a self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating church movement among the Huaorani?

Steve: Let's break those three down. In almost every place that I have ever been, the easiest one for the indigenous peoples to get hold of is to become self-propagating of their faith.

The self-propagating initiative took root among the Huaorani people before any real outsider ever went in. It started with Dayuma sharing the Gospel with Dawa who picked it up and she shared it with her husband.

For some peoples, self-government often comes fairly easy if they live in a society where they have a form of government. For the Huaorani, that's very difficult because they're very egalitarian. They have no system of government at all. So for them, one of the major efforts of missions, besides giving them some of the tools "like the Gospel and literacy" was to teach them to govern.

But after forty years of having the Gospel, when I went in they couldn't even identify elders which in the New Testament is the fundamental structure of the church. They don't know how to govern, but they certainly could have learned something about it in forty years. They were, however, less able to govern themselves as believers when I went down in the mid-90s than they were in the early 60s when I was there. That's a travesty.

MF: What needs to happen in order for that situation to change?

Steve: If I said, "You need to pick elders, and you need this thing," then I would be dominating the church again. But I took them to Scripture. Whenever they would ask me to say something in church, I would ask, "Do you want to read God's Carving here and here?" They would read it and then discuss it.

I made it clear to them that I didn't come as a missionary. They asked me to come down as part of the tribe. And that's the way they treated me. I was dealing with men in the church who had baptized me. These were men that I looked up to spiritually.

So I said, "I won't do things for you, but rather will work under you. You tell me what to do and I will do it." That was really an awkward dance. Both sides were waiting for the other one to lead. But as I forced myself not to take initiative, little by little they began to take it. They began to see that they had to make decisions. When they said, "Who should make the decisions?" I took them to the Scriptures where it talks about elders, and eldership. Then they started picking people for elders. When they asked, "Who should be elders?" I again took them back to the Scriptures. They realized on their own that one of the men that they had picked to be an elder, who is a very fervent, dependable believer, wasn't qualified because he had two wives, so they dismissed him and identified their six elders.

I was so excited that they had done this. I went out to tell outsiders who had dealings with this tribe that this monumental decision had been made. They didn't care. Not only were they not excited, nobody paid any attention. In the last three years that I have been down there, I have yet to hear one person "missionary or Ecuadorian believer from outside" ever acknowledge that the Huaorani have a group of elders for their church. They never address them or talk about them. Nobody knows who they are. I've told them and they just ignore it. It's unbelievable!

MF: That is incredible! So the people on the outside don't even appreciate the steps they do make, not to mention encouraging them towards self-reliance?

Steve: That's right. And then on the self-supporting end, they have no economy. To the best of my knowledge, the only way that anybody in this tribe has ever made any money is to go and work for the

oil company. They go out to the oil camps, and find there's prostitution and other things going on. The believers refuse to go and they encourage their people not to go.

But they need money for medicine and transportation by plane to their clinic. They would say, "How are we going to pay for the flight? When the mission plane comes, it always takes the patient out to the mission hospital, never to our clinic." I can understand that. The pilots want them to get good care. But that's only physical attention.

So the people finally said, "Babae, (my nickname) we will do these things, but you tell us how to get money." So I agreed to help. A friend suggested that we consider doing tourism to start an economy. I thought, "The last thing that we need here is more people from the outside coming in." But then he pointed out a couple of things. Don't bring them into a village, take them to some neutral place so that they're not imposing on any village nor disrupting the school or clinic. That made sense to me.

The Huaorani and I talked about it and finally decided to start inviting people to come live with them for short periods of time to do a genuine experience tour. We couldn't think of anything else that would work. Most, but not all, of the groups that have come in are Christian groups.

With the monies that the Huaorani have earned, they have built their own clinic and school. They support their teachers, buy their own medicines and stock a little pharmacy. They have started trading posts for the older people who can come and trade artifacts, handmade net bags, hammocks, blowguns, and the other things they make. They can hand it to a Huaorani, and they can take home medicines, batteries, salt and other needed items.

With the tour money they have also purchased and paid for their own airplane. It's one from kits that we heavily modified and took down in suitcases and duffelbags, and built with the Huaorani.

It was all at their initiative. That plane represents more money than the tribe has ever earned in history as a corporate group. Every time I give them the money from a tour, I ask, "What do you want to do with your money?" They always say, "Babae, you take it and buy our airplane."

Their concern is for reaching their people. They've said to me, "We need to get the elders to the villages so they can teach in the places where there are no believers. If we go on the trail, when we get there, sometimes the people don't want to hear what we have to say. But if we go with the airplane, then we can take medicine and the dental equipment. Then they will all welcome us. While we distribute the medicine, and fix their teeth, we will teach them God's Carvings." Then they looked kind of sheepish and said, "When we're fixing their teeth, we can teach them God's Carvings, and they can't say anything back." They thought that was pretty clever.

But then they asked, "How can we do this if we don't have an airplane?" I replied, "Mission Aviation Fellowship flies for you." But they said, "Babae, they can only come when the weather is good, when they don't have other flights to do and when we can get a message to them by radio. That doesn't work."

So they said, "Babae, you get us a plane and we will work and then we will fly, and we will take the medicine, the dental equipment, the elders, and we will teach the people God's Carvings ourselves."

The Huaorani have realized that they need the tools that the missionaries have in order to take over from where they left off in reaching their people.

Don't misunderstand, they appreciate what the missionaries have done. But their primary concern is in reaching their young people.

The believers know that the new generation within the tribe has little interest in spiritual things. They're consumed with posturing and are extremely materialistic. The believers realized that the Cowodie

(missionaries) aren't doing anything about it. So they asked me to come. And I said, "The Cowodie aren't the people that God has called to reach these people. It's you." And I took them to the Scriptures and showed them, "This is your Jerusalem, and the priority is, first in Jerusalem." They said, "Yes. We will do it with the tools you helped us get."

MF: That was my next question. How do you reach the next generation? You're acting as the catalyst for their thinking rather than imposing anything on them.

Steve: I'm sure trying and I think it's working. In an uncanny way, I see the Holy Spirit working through the tourism.

As the people from the outside have come in, they're not interested in seeing the Huaorani young people standing around to show off their fake Nike tennis shoes. What they're interested in is how the Huaorani used to live, but it's only the old people who can show them that. The old people are the ones who know how to hunt with blowguns and spears, track animals, spear fish, climb trees with climbing vines, and all those things. That's what impresses the outsiders.

This has raised the value of the old ways in the eyes of the young people, opening a way for the elders to share the Gospel with the next generation.

MF: In what other ways are you trying to help the Huaorani and other indigenous peoples to reach their own people?

Steve: I have realized that it isn't enough just to point out the problems. I needed to be part of the solution. So after praying, wrestling and trying to figure out what I could do, I've gotten together with the Huaorani and with some friends and we have started "ITEC," Indigenous People's Technology and Education Center. The purpose is to provide the tools, technology, and backup support to help peoples like the Huaorani reach their own people" something like JAARS is to Wycliffe. That's something that is sadly lacking for indigenous peoples.

They can't, in most cases, use the exact technology that missionaries use because they are unable to support, operate, and maintain it. But they nevertheless need similar tools. So it just needs to be an appropriate technology adapted to their situation. Then they need to be taught how to use it to spread the Word to the many non-believers.

MF: So through ITEC you're trying to apply some of the technology from the outside to indigenous situations?

Steve: Yes, we're currently using the dental equipment, solar powered radio transmitters, computers and the airplane. Veteran missionaries were scandalized when they realized that I was taking in dental equipment that the Huaorani were going to operate. They thought it was irresponsible. But those were people who had never been out there and seen people suffering when they've got a toothache, and then to have people just come and yank their teeth out. We've got teenagers that don't have enough teeth to chew their food.

People come on almost a daily basis to get their teeth worked on there in Nemompade. Recently, two girls came over the trail wanting their teeth pulled. And the Huaorani scolded them and laughed at them, like they were ignorant. They said, "We don't pull teeth. Here we fix teeth. And after we fix the teeth, then if they hurt, then we pull them." The girls had never had their teeth fixed in their life. They didn't even know what was involved. They sat down and one of the people gave them novocaine, and the son of the first Huaorani Christian martyr, drilled and filled these girls' teeth, and sent them happily on their way; opening the door to go to their village to share the Gospel with them.

It's working. Some things they are very good at. They have great dexterity and have quickly learned how to drill and fill teeth. I availed myself of their services one time when I cracked a tooth.

But learning how to fly an airplane is a huge step. Trying to teach them how to navigate is a challenge. When I tried to teach one of them how to navigate, I kept trying to say, "Okay, you go straight from here over to there." But in the Huaorani language, they have no concept of straight. Trails aren't straight. Rivers aren't straight. Their houses aren't straight. Nothing is straight. But the Huaorani want to do it and they have the vision for it.

MF: Is there some way that people can support what you are doing without creating dependency?

Steve: There was a lot of research and development that went into getting the airplane that they couldn't afford. That is something that people could help us with financially. In the past, we have never asked for funds for ITEC, because I have been real careful "really scared" that it would open a Pandora's Box of problems.

But now we are at the point where we have working and proven prototypes. Thanks to some dentists that have helped us, we now have a dental rig with the chair that also serves as a medical examining table with the drilling units the whole thing. Two Wal-Mart tire pumps serve as a compressor and a generator to make the drill go. The whole thing, including hand pieces, weighs about 25 pounds and costs \$600. It's fully capable of being transported in the Huaorani's little airplane or on somebody's back.

These are the kinds of tools that the indigenous peoples in frontier areas can use to create the credibility that they need to share the Gospel with their own people.

As Christians we must give them that privilege of reaching their own and end the devastating practices that have created dependency among the Huaorani and thousands of peoples like them all over the world.