

Is There a Cure?

Looking for solutions to dependency among mission-established churches.

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One of the most difficult problems facing the Christian movement at the beginning of the 21st century is the dependency on outside funding that has developed in many mission-established churches. Church and mission leaders have several different reactions to this problem.

First, sometimes both mission leaders and church leaders are embarrassed about the dependency syndrome and would like to see the situation change. Not all of them fully understand what caused the problem or what to do about it, but they know that the situation is not healthy for the church or mission. As you will see later on, dependency among mission-established churches is not necessary; and where it exists, it can be eliminated.

Second, there are some who believe that dependent churches are a fact of life and nothing is likely to change that. They rationalize that we are all dependent on someone; therefore, they don't think there is anything wrong with Western Christians supporting non-Western churches the way they do. Some in this category are Westerners who feel guilty about their wealth and are actively looking for those with whom they can "partner" in the Gospel. They feel that the concept of self-supporting churches doesn't make much sense as long as some Christians are wealthier than others.

Third, there are some who are committed to planting new churches which are self-supporting from the very beginning. They know instinctively that the Gospel can be shared and people can come into right relationship with God without developing an unhealthy dependence on outside funding. We now have many examples of how churches can be planted and grow without developing dependency.

Fourth, there is a group of older missionaries and church leaders who lived for many years with the ideal of an indigenous, self-supporting church. They believed in the principle that mission-established churches should be self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating. When the churches they planted did not develop that way, they resigned themselves to providing and continuing to provide outside support. Sometimes those missionaries are reluctant to see the outside support stopped because the projects they started might be closed down or fail to operate. Some missionaries may never live to see their work become self-supporting.

A fifth group includes local church leaders who were converted and disciplined by missionaries and now receive their salary from outside support. They have concluded that their people are too poor to support their own churches and especially their own development projects so they might as well let the situation continue. Unfortunately, such churches are unlikely to learn the joy of sending out their own missionaries. Some of them feel they cannot support their own pastors, let alone help to plant new churches beyond their borders. But, let's not forget, there is a cure for this kind of dependency.

The sixth group is represented by newly planted churches where the people are actively seeking to attach themselves to individuals, churches or mission agencies willing to support them with foreign funds. This is the case in many parts of the former Soviet Union where western Christians are finding small groups of believers and adopting them as their "partners in the Gospel." In some cases, the outsiders visit for as little as two weeks and leave behind a church which they have "planted." That church may have a pastor dependent on salary from the outsiders, and the building in which they will eventually meet could well be provided through the good intentions of their new-found friends from England or North America. When this happens, the dependency syndrome is developed within a very short period of time. The Westerners who create this kind of dependent church planting have probably heard very little about indigenous principles of self-support. Sadly, in their joy of giving, some do not realize the full ramifications of their monetary policies.

Fortunately, there is also a seventh group. This includes those who used to be dependent but have made the transition to supporting their ministries with local resources. Such churches exhibit joy, pride and dignity as they experience God's blessing for taking this step of faith. Later on in this article I will give several examples of churches like that.

What is the good news?

Look at the spread of the Gospel in the time of the New Testament, and you will find that the Apostle Paul did not use outside funds to plant churches. In fact, one transfer of funds we find in the New Testament is from mission field churches back to the mother church when there was a famine in Jerusalem (II Corinthians 8). Another is when mission field churches contributed to the support of their missionary, the Apostle Paul (Philippians 4:15).

In our day, there is evidence that outside support is not essential to the growth and development of the Christian movement. Consider the rapid growth of a church in Ethiopia from 1938 to 1943. During this five-year period, membership increased from 100 to 10,000 believers with no missionaries and no outside funding present. The church in China increased from one million to perhaps as many as fifty million believers following 1951 when all missionaries and outside funding were removed.

Rev. Gerald Bustin illustrates this point quite well in an article regarding the planting of churches in Papua New Guinea and the former Soviet Union.² That mission society started about 200 churches in New Guinea. Upon the occasion of the 20-year celebration, the people in New Guinea sent air tickets to the missionaries in America, inviting them to return for the celebration.

In the Ukraine (part of the former Soviet Union), after several years of church planting, the local believers asked for the privilege of repaying the missionaries for the expenses they had in bringing the Gospel to them. All of this is to say that planting dependent churches may often happen, but it does not need to happen. That is good news for those involved in cross-cultural church planting.

How does dependency affect the meaning of the Gospel?

When outside money and other material things accompany the spread of the Christian Gospel, sometimes people get the wrong impression about the Gospel itself. For example, if those to whom the Gospel is preached begin to receive material things that come with the Gospel, they may become more interested in those things than in the Gospel itself. I once met two missionaries working in western Tanzania. When they arrived, one of the first questions the local people asked was, "Where are your shipping containers?" When they said they did not have any shipping containers, the people said, "What kind of missionaries are you no shipping containers?" Clearly the people were thinking about what they might get when servants of the Lord arrived from the outside.

What is wrong with the spread of the Gospel in this way? Is it not precisely that the Gospel itself is being distorted? Think for a moment about what the good news of the Gospel is. First, people will learn about the broken relationship between God and mankind and that there is one who repairs that relationship Jesus Christ? Second, when that Gospel comes, one is freed from the burden of past sin. Third, one is introduced to the Holy Spirit a Power greater than all the powers which caused so many problems in the past. Fourth, one learns that if godly principles are followed, many other problems in life can be resolved. Fifth, there is the most important benefit of all, eternal life for all who believe. All of these things come with the Gospel.

Is there any price to be paid for this salvation? It is free, with one exception: For the rest of our lives, believers are obligated to give back to God some of what He has given to us. In other words, such things as tithing giving back a portion of one's income become a part of the privilege and responsibility we have as believers.

When people come into the Christian faith for the material possessions they get something goes terribly wrong in the spread of the Gospel. That might be the single most important reason why the dependency problem so often cripples the Christian movement and why it is so urgent that it be avoided or dealt with where it exists.

What can be done where the problem exists?

No one should look for quick and easy solutions to the problem of dependency especially where it has been in place for many years. Old habits are hard to break especially when changing them means learning a whole new way of getting support for the Church. Those receiving salary from overseas funds may be reluctant to see the system change. Those responsible for creating dependency in the first place (like missionaries) may hesitate to see it change because they have been getting a good feeling from giving, even if it has created dependency and left others unable to stand on their own two feet.

There are things which can be done to either avoid or resolve the problem of dependency. The following are a few suggestions for both church leaders and missionaries.

First, we should all recognize that the healthiest churches are not those where leaders or members constantly look to outsiders for financial support. If you want to see joy and a sense of satisfaction on the faces and in the hearts of believers, don't look for it among those who are dependent on foreign funds. Rather, look for it among those who have discovered the joy of giving back to God something of what He has given to them from the resources which He has put close at hand.

Second, begin to recognize the kind of things which cause dependency and seek to overcome the temptation to establish or continue such practices. It will take serious determination not to think of solving problems with outside funds. And remember, the problem cannot be solved if the concept of stewardship is not first built into the Christian message.

I will give an example. In South Africa there is a church which was very poor. Thirty years ago only unemployed women and children were in that church. Leaders regularly went overseas to find funding for their church members. Then something dramatic occurred. The church was turned around. Men began coming to church, women became self-employed and soon the church was no longer depending on funds from overseas. When one asks what change took place, the women will say that they were taught how to make a living like making and selling dresses, grass mats or baskets. They were also taught that of everything they made and sold, ten percent (the tithe) belonged to the Lord. In fact, they were taught that giving (tithing) was to be built into the earning process. God honored that kind of teaching, and today that church is well able to stand on its own two feet. At a recent weekend conference, those present put into the collection the equivalent of over one million U.S. dollars. All of that was from a church which not so long ago included only unemployed women and children.

Third, it is important to realize that the need for spiritual renewal is at the root of this problem. Do not expect people who do not know the Lord to joyfully support their own churches. Do not expect believers whose faith has grown cold to willingly pay their tithes and offerings to the Lord. Spiritual life must precede an emphasis on stewardship teaching.

Fourth, there is something else which must precede stewardship teaching. This is what I call a feeling of true personal ownership. Without this, people in dependent churches will often look to someone else to build their buildings, pay their pastors, buy their vehicles or support their development projects. Imagine what could happen, but, if people were to take full personal ownership for their own churches. Things which previously were thought to be impossible would all of a sudden become possible. Resources would be discovered which, prior to this, no one could see. These would be resources which were close at hand all along. Only when local ownership is fully in place will people begin to discover the joy of supporting their own church and the work of God's Kingdom.

Fifth, there is sometimes a high price to be paid for moving from dependency toward self-reliance. Some local church leaders may need to say "no, thank you" to the outside funding which has been supporting them and their families. This happened in East Africa about 30 years ago when local leaders asked the people overseas to stop supporting them financially. They were actually declining the funds used to pay their own salaries. What followed, however, was dramatic. The leaders soon learned that local believers were not only capable of paying their salaries, but also able to pay for their own church buildings and vehicles. They also planted new churches from their own resources. They started a pension fund for retired pastors, something no one until that time thought could be done with local resources. Then those believers in East Africa heard about homeless children overseas and took a collection in Kenya shillings worth about US\$30,000 to help with that need. All of these things happened after they paid the price to stop the outside funding.

Sixth, one might ask why it is so important to resolve the problem of dependency among mission-established churches. Think for a moment about how many funds are being raised for evangelism yet are actually being used to support churches where people are already evangelized. Is it right to keep on supporting those who have heard the Gospel many times when there are millions of people elsewhere who are still waiting to hear it for the very first time? In some places the Gospel has been preached for 100 years or more and yet the people are still looking to others to support their pastors or build their buildings. For those who have not yet heard the Gospel even once, that is just not fair.

Remember the good news

The good news is that dependency does not need to be considered a terminal illness. There are churches which have proved that, as I tried to show above.

For those who are interested in pursuing this issue further, I will point out two resources. One is the World Mission Associates web site: www.wmausa.org. It has about 70 articles on dependency and self-reliance some written by me, others by African church leaders or other missionaries. If you don't have access to the World Wide Web, a collection of printed articles can be obtained through by contacting World Mission Associates at the address below.²

A second resource now available is an eight-hour teaching series with a 125-page Study Guide entitled *Dependency Among Mission-Established Institutions: Exploring the Issues*. It is available in video format (NTSC, PAL, and SECAM) as well as audio cassette and audio CD-ROM. Further details are below.³

A final word of encouragement

It is my desire to see those who feel trapped in dependent churches learn how to discover the joy and freedom which results from overcoming dependency. I dedicate my time and energy to helping those who want to discover the joy of standing on their own two feet. If we all learn to work together and discover how to depend on the Holy Spirit, progress can be made in overcoming dependency.

Remember the Macedonian Church which the Apostle Paul mentioned in 2 Corinthians 8:3. Of these people Paul wrote, "out of severe trial and extreme poverty they pleaded for the privilege of giving." Notice also that he mentions that "they gave themselves first to the Lord." Without spiritual renewal, churches will not overcome the dependency syndrome.

1. "The New Guinea Bible Church," presented at the Philadelphia Consultation, November 1999. Available on the WMA web site: <

2. World Mission Associates
825 Darby Lane
Lancaster, PA 17601-2009

USA

3. The WMA video series entitled *Dependency Among Mission Established Institutions: Exploring the Issues* is available through the address on the heading of this article. It is available in video format as well as audio cassette and audio CD-ROM.

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