



Walk with Me (Part 2): The Path to Interdependency

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In a world of enormous economic inequalities, how does the American church navigate the treacherous waters of dependency in mission? Glenn Schwartz (Schwartz 2007) argues for “self-reliance,” saying that foreign money given for local ministry inevitably leads to unhealthy dependency, which erodes human dignity, dampens local giving and initiative, and fosters a sense of entitlement.

On the “interdependency” side of the debate, John Rowell says that North Americans’ reluctance to give generously only delays the advance of the gospel while intensifying poverty for others (Rowell 2006). But what if the real problem is not dependency, but rather coming to terms with the demands of interdependency? What follows is a seven-point proposal by which the Western Church, working with the Majority World Church, can bridge the wealth divide and realize the unity we have in Christ.

1. **ELIMINATE DOUBLE STANDARDS**
2. **KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY DEPENDENCY**
3. **EMBRACE THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF WEALTH**
4. **PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT, NOT BETTERMENT**
5. **BUILD COVENANT RELATIONSHIPS, NOT ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS**
6. **FACILITATE FISCAL INTEGRITY**
7. **PURSUE SUSTAINABLE IMPACT**

1. Eliminate Double Standards

To bridge the wealth-divide, the Western church must first confront a common, but not so obvious obstacle—its own double standards. Churches can suspect they operate with double standards in mission financing if those discussions imply that only North Americans should spend North American money. The argument goes like this. It is right for North Americans to spend money on displaced families in Sudan, but it is wrong for Sudanese to spend American money to aid displaced families in Sudan. It is acceptable for North Americans to financially support a North American missionary, for instance, in Timbuktu, but it is unacceptable to support a Malian missionary in Timbuktu. It is appropriate to fund North American radio broadcasting to northern Sumatra. It is not appropriate to fund Indonesian broadcasting to northern Sumatra. According to this argument, the reason it is not acceptable to share money with Sudanese, Indonesian, or Malian Christians is the presumption that it will cause unhealthy dependency.

In effect, what is disallowed for Majority World missionaries is allowed for North American missionaries. In the situations listed above, would North American missionaries and programs be dependent on North American money? Yes, of course. Most North American missionaries and programs are dependent on North American money. So clearly, dependency itself is not the problem. Unhealthy dependency is the problem.

Interdependency starts by doing away with double standards. When we do away with double standards, we can start dealing with the real causes of unhealthy dependency.

2. Know the Difference Between Healthy and Unhealthy Dependency

To understand the causes of unhealthy dependency, we must first discern the difference between healthy and unhealthy dependency. Let's start by defining terms.

Healthy Dependency. In mission relationships, healthy dependency is the capacity to use outside resources while reinforcing the qualities of **autonomy**, **responsibility**, and **resourcefulness**.

By *outside* resources, I mean those resources from outside the culture. It may mean funds come from overseas or a distant source, but it certainly means that funds come from a source not embedded in or subject to local cultural, social, and economic conditions.

Autonomy is the freedom of local leaders to act on their own vision and values. To be autonomous is to be self-directing and self-governing. Autonomous people stand on their own two feet. Part of being autonomous is placing yourself under God's governance, regardless of what others say or do.

Responsibility is acting on one's own obligations. To be responsible is to make every effort to obey God, love your neighbor, and do justice. Responsible people do their part; they contribute something to the family, church, and community. Part of being responsible is giving generously, even giving sacrificially for the welfare of others and the work of the gospel.

Resourcefulness is the ability to make the best use of the resources at one's disposal. To be resourceful is to deal skillfully and promptly with new situations and difficulties. Resourceful people take initiative with whatever resources are at hand. Part of being resourceful is trusting God for what you need and making the most of what you have. In a healthy relationship, both parties

- maintain their independence and capacity to instruct, correct, and refuse the other
- honor and uphold the unique and divine calling of the other
- recognize their responsibilities, and work to fulfill them
- trust God for what they need, and make the most of the resources at hand
- act in a manner that safeguards the other's dignity and honors Christ

In this way, healthy dependency creates a reciprocating social contract of accountability. In the body of Christ, believers have an obligation to help, to share, to bear one another's burdens. But those who benefit also have the obligation to be responsible. This reciprocating social contract breaks down or fails to develop where autonomy, responsibility, and resourcefulness are ignored or neglected.

UNHEALTHY DEPENDENCY.

Unhealthy dependency is the inverse of healthy dependency. In mission relationships, unhealthy dependency is reliance on outside resources at the expense of local autonomy, responsibility, and resourcefulness. When even one of these qualities is lacking, unhealthy dependency may occur.

This tells us that the location of the funding source is not the primary cause of unhealthy dependency—which is not to say that distance does not matter. Distance does matter. But there is more to unhealthy dependency than merely the distance between the giver and receiver.

To understand what causes unhealthy dependency, we have to move beyond the simple formula of geographic proximity.

Causes. Unhealthy dependency has many causes, but the main causes can be grouped into three categories: mindsets, cultural differences, and situational dynamics.

Mindsets. Cross-cultural relationships are deeply influenced by the mindset to which people are predisposed. Three mindsets are commonly recognized to cause or prolong unhealthy dependency: paternalism, quick-fix mentality, and entitlement.

Paternalistic mindset. Paternalism is the practice of treating people in a fatherly manner, especially by providing for their needs without acknowledging their rights or responsibilities. Schwartz and Rowell agree that paternalism is a primary cause of unhealthy dependency. Unhealthy dependency occurs when

- cultural outsiders provide funding in a way that limits local leaders' freedom to act on their own vision,
- foreign funding is offered in a manner that relegates local workers to a position subordinate to their benefactors, and
- funds are given without regard to the capacity of the local ministry to manage, maintain, or maximize investments made (Rowell 2006, 15).

Quick-fix mindset. The quick-fix mentality is the tendency to hurriedly focus on what is immediately wrong—while consequently missing the underlying causes. It often assumes that most problems can be fixed with enough money and expertise. Development, however, whether of individuals or entire communities, is a slow process that almost never lends itself to quick solutions. The quick-fix mentality

often sets up a “we-them” dichotomy in which “we” have the solution and the resources to solve the problem for “them.” The quick-fix mentality overlooks the resourcefulness of others in the rush to solve a problem. Dynamics of this kind fuel the possibility of unhealthy dependency.

Entitlement mindset. Entitlement is the mindset of being entitled to certain rights and privileges. A rich man may feel entitled to lavish vacations in exotic places. After all, he reasons, it’s his money and he can do as he pleases. A poor man may feel he has the right to guaranteed benefits under a government program. For example, I serve as a board director of a ministry that works with the poor in the mountains of West Virginia. One of the most difficult obstacles to helping the poor is their sense of entitlement. It is not unusual for men to refuse a job because they would earn only a little more money than the welfare benefits they receive from the government. Entitlement corrupts the sense of responsibility and reinforces self-serving behavior.

Cultural differences. Nothing disrupts global ministry relationships more quickly than cultural misunderstandings about finances. Both Schwartz and Rowell emphasize the importance of understanding cultural differences. Given the scope of cultural differences, the best I can do here is recommend the books by Mary Lederleitner (2010) and David Maranz (2001) listed at the end of this article.

Situational dynamics. Unhealthy dependency can also be attributed to situational dynamics, that is, the circumstances that combine to form a given situation. In some situations, the risk of unhealthy dependency is low, while in others it is high. The best approach in any given situation is not necessarily to avoid the risk, but to understand it and take steps to mitigate the potential hazards.

Listed below are several contrasting situations, each having different implications on the risk of unhealthy dependency. Each situation represents a continuum of risk, low to high.

Local initiative vs. foreign initiative. Was the project envisioned and launched by local Christians, or did cultural outsiders start it?

Established ministry vs. start-up. Does the ministry have a proven record of accomplishment and best-practice approaches, or is it new and untested?

Community-based vs. agenda-driven. Is the relationship seen as a pilgrimage of faith or as a series of tasks to be accomplished?

Long-term vs. short-term. Is the goal of the relationship to address underlying causes of systemic problems, or is the goal to solve an immediate problem?

Autonomous vs. transitional. Are the organizations self-standing and independent, or are they in the process of becoming independent of one another?

Any one of these situations, and especially some combinations of situations, may increase or decrease the risk of unhealthy dependency. Situational dynamics make all the difference in whether a relationship moves toward an unhealthy dependency or toward interdependency.

Estimating the impact of foreign financial support on local autonomy, responsibility, and resourcefulness can assess whether a situation represents a high risk or a low risk of unhealthy dependency.

But here's the catch. The ability to assess unhealthy dependency depends on an in-depth understanding of the local context, conditions, and people involved. This kind of knowledge comes only with local involvement and intimate relationships, in a word, with interdependency.

A careful look at the causes of unhealthy dependency suggests that the best remedy is not less dependency, but greater levels of healthy dependency. We cannot solve the problems of unhealthy dependency by pulling away and ignoring the needs of under-resourced believers. *The solutions to unhealthy dependency lie within interdependency.*

There is only one direction for the global church to move, and that is toward interdependency, not away from it. Both biblical and practical evidence demand it.

3. Embrace the Responsibilities of Wealth

As Jonathan Bonk reveals, missionaries from North America are often wealthy relative to their ministry contexts. "When a missionary is 'rich' in contexts of poverty," Bonk writes, "what the Bible says to and about the wealthy, it says about the missionary" (Bonk 2006, 160). In view of this, Bonk proposes that Western Christians generally, and missionaries particularly, "embrace the status of 'righteous rich' and learn to play its associated roles in ways that are both culturally appropriate and biblically disciplined" (167).

"The righteous rich," Bonk explains, "are those whose immense good fortune is put at the disposal of the neighbors among whom God places them" (172). Rich Christians are neither condemned for their wealth nor required to change places with the poor. They are, however, warned of the corrupting influences of wealth and called upon to pay fair wages and give generously of their surplus.

If we are to rightly care for under-resourced people, the responsibility lies with those who have the resources to create systems of sharing, built on equity and generosity.

4. Practice Development, Not Betterment

A pivotal issue in interdependency is the tension between “doing for others” and “others doing for themselves.” When confronted by poverty, people of compassion *do things for* others. They drill wells, build schools, open health clinics, or any number of practical activities to meet needs. Bob Lupton calls these “betterment activities” (Lupton 2007, 39).

Betterment, for all its good intentions, is inadequate because it is based on *doing for* others rather than on enabling others to *do for themselves*.

By contrast, development enables others to do for themselves (Corbett and Fikkert 2009; Myers 2007). Development occurs as people dream their own dreams, identify their own resources, and make their own plans, which they then translate into appropriate action. In this process, development is something we neither “give” nor “do” to others. Rather, it is a way we stand in relation to them. It involves accompanying others in the process of building a better future. In the end, the results may look the same as betterment, but the means to get there is more empowering and enduring.

Doing for others what they can do for themselves is the root of unhealthy dependency. *Practicing development is the key to fostering interdependency.*

5. Build Covenant Relationships, Not Assistance Programs

Covenant relationships, not assistance programs, lie at the heart of bridging the wealth-divide and working together in the gospel. Assistance programs are problem-oriented. Covenants are commitment-oriented. Assistance programs are transactional. Covenants are relational. The essence of assistance is giving. The essence of covenant is promise. Under-resourced people are empowered not so much by aid, but by allies who demonstrate an ongoing commitment to a shared vision.

A covenant is a bond between two parties in which they promise to fulfill certain conditions. In the kingdom of God, covenant relationships are founded on the person and mission of God. In this respect, a covenant among Christians is a three-way bond—with one another and God. The conditions of the relationship are dictated first by Scripture and second by the vision and values of the covenanters. These conditions set covenant relationships apart from aid programs and create the possibility of interdependency in an ongoing commitment to a mutually agreed-upon agenda.

6. Facilitate Fiscal Integrity

There is no getting around it. Money is often the source of frustration and mischief in cross-cultural partnerships. Stewardship is a serious responsibility, required of all ministries everywhere in the world. Fiscal integrity doesn't happen automatically. It requires appropriate systems of accountability and transparency (Lederleitner 2010).

At a minimum, North American and Majority World organizations should be able to meet commonly accepted standards of financial accountability. Some of these standards include the following:

- oversight by an active board of directors
- regular preparation of financial statements
- willingness to share financial and operational information
- access to senior management, and
- the opportunity to inspect programs.

Although these standards may be too rigorous or inappropriate for some organizations, most can achieve a contextualized version of essential standards and best practices.

7. Pursue Sustainable Impact

Sustainability is commonly understood as an organization's ability to maintain financial resources to ensure that projects will continue. Financial sustainability is desirable to be sure, but as Rowell points out, income is a poor measure of ministry impact. Instead of thinking of sustainability in monetary terms, Rowell proposes that we think in terms of "sustainable impact" (Rowell 2006, 223–27). What ultimately matters are outcomes reflecting changed lives, not financial independence. Pursuing sustainable impact through a covenant relationship is more likely to produce solidarity and sacrifice than paternalism and entitlement.

Is interdependency across the wealth-divide a noble but impossible dream? Is it possible only for those close to one another geographically and economically? Now that the church is bigger than ever before in history—now that it spans the globe and makes its home in nearly every nation and in numerous languages, now that countless Christians have a history of successfully relating to each other across barriers of geography, country, and culture, now that we have come this far—are we willing to say that the wealth-divide is too great to overcome? Are we willing to say that the cross of Christ is sufficient to overcome ethnic, national, and gender differences but not sufficient to bridge the wealth gap?

The answers are no for those willing to do away with double standards, to accept the obligations of wealth, to practice development, to work in covenant, to submit to fiscal disciplines, and to pursue sustainable impact. ■

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