

Negative Dependency: A Major Roadblock to Movement

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Unhealthy dependency on western resources continues to be a problem in many parts of Central and Eastern Europe and one in which we need to act prudently. Over the past fifteen years, church buildings have been built across the region which cannot be even maintained by the giving of the local congregation without outside support. Many pastors minister without at least some or total foreign support for them and their ministry. Significant partnerships between cross-cultural workers and nationals have come apart over the issue or expectation of outside funding.

The problem before us is how can we, on the one hand, fulfill our Biblical obligation to give to those who have less than we do materially while, at the same time, give in such a way that we empower our brothers and sisters to give even more. While most would agree that dependency on western funding is a problem, there are many different responses. In seeking to encourage saturation church planting in the region how should we respond? What responses are more prudent than others in terms of encouraging the healthy development and growth of a church planting movement? These are questions that we must face now as the region continues to change both socially, politically, and most importantly, spiritually. This issue of negative or unhealthy dependency must be addressed in order for us to see movements of church planting development and flourish.

Scripture has much to say about stewardship, wise use of material resources, and giving. However, these passages are rarely taught by many of the evangelical churches and ministries of the region. It is not the purpose of this brief paper to present a Biblical understanding of giving and stewardship. However, let me just highlight a couple of principles which need to shape our discussion. First, we are commanded by God's Word to give, regardless of our level of income (2 Cor. 8 & 9). Furthermore, we are to give at a level in proportion to the way in which the Lord has blessed us (Deut. 16:17; Acts 11:29; 2 Cor. 8:12). We are told to give to those who have fewer material resources (Matt. 5:42; Luke 12:33; Acts 11:29; 20:35; 1 John 3:17). We are blessed by the Lord when we participate in this "grace of giving" (2 Cor. 8 & 9).

Therefore, we all have an obligation to give. Those with more material blessings do need to be sharing with those with less. We should not be giving in such a way that it discourages other brothers and sisters from giving as well. Rather, our giving should spur those who receive to give even more.

What are our options when a need for funding is presented? As I see it, our basic responses can be any one or several of the following:

1. Do nothing, simply encouraging funds to be found within or outside the country from other sources. These will be found from other outside sources in most cases, whether we are involved or not.

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2. Work on creative options such as micro-enterprise, to help nationals fund their own ministry.
3. Decide to only fund “capital”, one-time projects and not to fund salaries or on-going operating expenses.
4. Fund salaries or on-going expenses for a certain percentage or on a gradually decreasing scale.
5. Fund salaries or on-going expenses completely with outside funds.

In looking at our options, I think we must look at the final outcome of what we do. Will our solution be a quick and temporary “band-aid” fix or will it lead to the ministry being able to continue long after we are off the scene? If we fund a given project in some way, what happens when the money dries up? Will we be creating possibly an even worse situation by giving temporary support, than by starting more modestly with the funds and resources at hand, allowing the ministry to grow slower but at a pace that can be sustained by the local resources? What will happen when we are no longer there to administer the funding for the particular ministry? Who will ensure that the funds are used for the things they are designated (many of the cultures of the region have different ideas about what is correct in terms of the handling of funds)?

One huge area, I feel, that needs to be addressed is stewardship. If our brothers and sisters in the region do not learn the grace of giving now, they will not learn it in a few years when the economy of their country (most of which are steadily improving) is much better and they have many more resources of their own to give. As we search for answers, part of the solution, I believe, is focusing on educating those we minister with concerning this important privilege that we have as believers.

Ultimately, we want to develop ministry and funding for ministry in such a way that the ministry is as indigenous (locally led and supported) as possible. In the final analysis, only indigenous ministries will have longevity. Only those ministries for which the local people take ownership will continue long after we are gone. How do we do that? Will our solutions lead to healthy, growing ministries in the region or will we simply contribute to the problem of dependency?

As we look at the question of “negative dependency”, first and foremost, we need to declare again our total dependence on the Lord. Only through His wisdom and guidance will we be able to find answers that will lead the way to unleashing His Church in the region to multiply and minister in ways we can now only imagine. Only then, will we see this major barrier to movement begin to be removed so that church multiplication can take place in unprecedented ways throughout this part of Europe.