

SCOPE OF UNHEALTHY DEPENDENCY¹

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Abstract

This paper looks at a number of issues relating to Unhealthy Dependency between churches in Africa and those in the Materially Developed World. Having defined unhealthy Dependency and recognising the significance of finance in this area, it looks at the bigger picture, identifying a number of other areas where Unhealthy Dependency has arisen and continues to be significant. It also seeks to indicate the significance for vulnerable mission of these areas.

Looking forward to meeting a local pastor, with whom she was going to work, for the first time, relatively new BMS worker JR was shocked when his first words were “No visitor comes empty handed so what have you brought for me?” She soon realised that this attitude, of seeing pounds or dollar signs immediately on meeting someone from the Materially Developed World (MDW) was not unique to that part of Uganda, was commonplace.

This attitude of unhealthy dependency, that is a very unfortunate result of some mission work in the developing world, would seem to be a major cause of stunted growth in many parts of the worldwide Church. My mission experience has been largely in East Africa, so this is where my thinking will centre, but from my reading and talking with others, it is clear that East Africa is not alone in this matter.

Biblical pictures of the Church as the Body of Christ or as a family, make it clear that God’s purpose for the parts of his Church is not independent isolation but dependent working together, with each part using its strengths for the benefit of the whole. Seen on an

¹ Based on article published at <http://trn.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/08/30/0265378813501738>
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international scale this shows the limitations of the excellent three-self policy of church planting made popular by Henry Venn of CMS² and Rufus Anderson³ at the beginning of the last century. Whilst, right from their inception, it should be intended that new churches should become self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating bodies, this should not be at the expense of on-going fellowship across the breadth of the Church.

Churches in the MDW have resources that can help the Church in Africa grow. To unnecessarily hold these back would be to deny this fellowship. On the other hand to employ these resources, ostensibly to 'help' the developing churches, but actually in such a way that it hurts or stultifies their growth is also to deny this fellowship. To use these resources in such a way that churches grow in depth and breadth and in fellowship with other churches is a sign of healthy dependency. To use these resources carelessly so that real growth is not encouraged or aided leads to unhealthy dependency.

It is this unhealthy dependency that is the subject of this paper, seeking to consider some of its scope, not only in finance but in wider spheres of influence and to see how this relates to Vulnerable Mission as currently enunciated by AVM.

Finance

The most obvious area for dependency, healthy or unhealthy, to develop is in the area of finance. Christians and churches in the MDW have so much more, materially, than those in Africa, that it is clear that true fellowship should involve sharing some of these resources. It is clear from the secular world that just giving money to African countries (or other countries for that matter) does not solve their problems, but exacerbates them and creates a lot

² Venn worked inductively at finding the principles of mission. He observed weaknesses in a missionary-founded, missionary-led church. Shenk, W. in Dictionary of African Christian Biography at www.dabc.org

³ Though there is dispute as to who wrote about the idea first, the "three-self" method is attributed to both Anderson and [Henry Venn](#). They both wrote about the need for creating churches in the missions field that were self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. Wikipedia on Rufus Anderson accessed 5 Nov 13 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rufus_Anderson

more problems. The human nature that is at work in the secular world is not absent from the Church and has historically been shown to be just as active and destructive. Seeking to just give money to solve the problems of the Church in Africa, particularly in the area of poverty, has shown up greed, jealousy, dishonesty and corruption, as well as stifling local initiative, local stewardship and local leadership, as well as creating massive tensions between parts of the Body of Christ in different parts of the world. That is among the recipients of the finance. Amongst the donors, equal evils of pride, superiority, self-sufficiency, misuse of power, and 'playing God' are fed by this false concept that money will solve the problems.

The sharing of financial and other resources is clearly an important part of Christian fellowship across the world, but it must be done 'judicially and carefully' to avoid the traps mentioned above. One of the major pillars of AVM is to do cross-cultural mission using only local resources. Much has been said and written about this side of things (and will continue to be), but my purpose in this paper is to broaden the issue to look at other areas where unhealthy dependency has grown up or is still being encouraged, and how they relate to VM. Finance rears its ugly head in many of these areas, but usually as a side issue.

Personnel and Leadership

As the Gospel seems to have come to Africa from the MDW, bringing 'superior' spiritual truths, many, both from Africa and the MDW have associated all that comes from the MDW as superior. This includes personnel. The result of this is a lack of willingness, on both sides of the situation, to give leadership to Africans, even when they are fully qualified to take it.

This led to the feeling that the white man was always right. In some cases this was also probably because to disagree with the white man might prejudice access to resources. Add to this the fact that most folk who become mission overseas personnel have at some time

or another felt God's call to serve Him cross-culturally and are generally strong characters, and the scene is set for attitudes of superiority and inferiority, coupled with the awful consequences of paternalism.

In the paper which formed the basis for this paper, *No Visitor Comes Empty Handed*⁴, I identified at least 5 attitudes which give rise to this unhealthy dependency:

1. When there is the mindset (either amongst Africans or people from the MDW) that feels that everyone who comes from the MDW is superior to local people,
2. When foreigners and/or local people do not believe that local people are capable of effective leadership,
3. When foreigners fail to train up local leaders,
4. When foreigners insist on control and leadership, even when local qualified leadership is available,
5. When structures are put in place that rely on foreign expertise and not local methodology.

It is the, often unintentional, attitude of superiority from folk from the MDW that is foundational for the other attitudes. Before we criticise others for this approach, it is important for us to seriously search our own hearts for past errors in this line, as well current beliefs. 'How can someone involved in mission work, who reaches out in love in Christ's name have this kind of approach?' we may ask. Unfortunately, it is often this attitude of bringing the love of Jesus to others that makes us feel that we are giving the best gift in the world to others, and that everything we bring, by association, is also best.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there were many, missionaries included among them, who genuinely felt that Africans were definitely inferior to Europeans, and could not be expected to take leadership or management responsibilities. Joseph Booth, a maverick

⁴ Ralph Hanger, *No Visitor Comes Empty Handed: Some Thoughts on Unhealthy Dependency*. Transformation (02653788); Jan 2014, Vol. 31 Issue 1, p21.

missionary to Nyasaland (modern Malawi) was an exception to this, and he got into serious trouble with his fellow missionaries for suggesting anything different. In his booklet, *Africa for the African*⁵, which was really a tract addressed to Queen Victoria about resettling emancipated slaves from America in Africa, he boldly stated his opinion that: “Even Missionaries, many of them need teaching that the African is inferior in opportunity only” (Booth 2008 :65).

Booth established a number of Industrial Missions in Nyasaland to prove his point. One of these, Providence Industrial Mission, produced John Chilembwe, the first real challenge to white authority, and who is still considered a national hero nearly one hundred years after his martyrdom.

Today there are probably very few people in mission circles who would bring out the mantra of African inferiority, but by insistence of people from the MDW having their own personnel in certain positions, and the lack of trust frequently shown for African solutions, the superior/inferior attitudes can be seen to be still alive and active.⁶ There are many aspects of this that could be discussed and we could all bring anecdotal evidence to the table.

It is a tricky subject. We have all probably looked in from the outside to other people’s situations (and even our own), and felt that foreigners are too much in control of local church work or decision making or resource use or have been ‘in post’ too long or have an irrelevant life-style and so on. In many cases we may be right, but it is not easy to suggest to some of these folk that the call they have had from God in the past may well have changed in the present.

⁵ Booth, J. (2008). *Africa for the African Zomba* – original text 1897, reprint 2nd edition, edited by Laura Perry in Kachere Series.

⁶ As this is being written, the 2011 Libyan crisis has been unfolding. The Western press has been full of the American, British, French and NATO attempts at finding an answer, but there has not been a single mention, in the Western media, of the African Union heads of nations who have been seeking to find a diplomatic solution to the troubles.

One aspect which is relevant to VM is the assumed superiority of the English (French or Spanish) language. Because these MDW languages have been analysed and studied in such great depth and developed by linguistic experts, we do feel that our languages are broader and superior. Now that the internet and modern communications have pushed English (or American) in such a way, we feel that everyone should learn it, and that Mission work is easier in it. VM counters this approach as it points out how local languages speak from and to the local heart, and express ideas that are essential to local culture in a way that 'foreign languages' cannot. It is only when the good news of Jesus speaks right into heart and culture that it can be said to have arrived. Most things outside this can be superficial and ineffective in changing people's lives.

What is the way ahead in this area? A large part of it is education. Teaching Christians in the MDW about the extreme dangers of paternalism, and the importance of understanding the local culture before trying to bring the Gospel to it in such a way that it can bring about real transformation of life, yes, and of culture, is a major part of this. Although this needs to be a big part of preparation for cross-cultural training in Bible schools and mission colleges, it must also become part of the fabric of the church in the MDW.

One of the reasons for this is that so much cross-cultural intercourse nowadays is done outside the traditional 'mission sending' structures, and well meaning Christians and churches are linking across the continents in seeking to serve God, without this background. Praiseworthy though some of this activity may seem to be, the result can be catastrophic as churches are 'planted' which are unsustainable, and thus become unhealthily dependent on their MDW contacts and, dare we say, without the in-depth work in the hearts of those involved.

Theology

One of the reasons why some workers from the MDW stay longer in a country than might be helpful is their fear of syncretism – mixing of the true faith with tribal ideas, and thus a false theology developing. This seems to be particularly in Bible colleges. On the surface this seems a fair approach. After all most workers from the MDW have had a longer experience of the Christian faith than local folk, and have had the advantage of study both in college and through books and so on. There are a number of weaknesses in this approach, which we can touch on now, but which need closer consideration to avoid serious errors.

Much has been written in the past about differing worldviews between the MDW and Africa. This is not the place to go into the various definitions and understandings of this. Suffice it to say that in most cases people from the MDW have a dualistic worldview which seeks to separate out material and spiritual realms, and are quite content to work in one or other of these realms without reference to the significance of the other. Most traditional Africans have a more monistic worldview, in which there is no separation of physical and spiritual. For them each physical, material experience has a spiritual meaning or experience underlying it. This is frequently more important to them than what the dualists would call the physical side. Clearly this will have an important impact on the way Theology is understood. Moving from a dualistic approach to a monistic approach is not easy, and may never be completely accomplished. Part of the problem is when folk from the MDW do not understand these differences, and seek to apply theological approaches which are dualistic, thinking that that is the right way. This is an extension of West is Best, and can lead to an undermining of local understanding of important issues and further feelings of local inferiority to MDW superiority.

Being brought up in the MDW, many missionaries have had no experience of some issues, and do not know how to relate them to Scripture, and often in their ignorance either treat them as insignificant or, worse still, treat them as of the devil and thus to be put down at

every opportunity. Early missionaries who took this approach could almost be excused because of a general ignorance in the MDW of things outside Europe. In the 21st century, there is absolutely no excuse.

Issues which might come into this area are – ancestral spirits, polygamy, family loyalty, and community life. Folk from the MDW have often condemned local attitudes far too quickly, without realising how deeply these issues are part of local culture and tradition, or how much their attitudes to these things have been shaped by MDW culture and tradition rather than Biblically. Failure to show a Biblical attitude to these and other more ‘African’ experiences, both in evangelism and in Biblical teaching and training, does not reach the soul of many Africans, and leads to a superficial theology. Those of us from the MDW need to be prepared to take more of a back seat, today, in theological debates and listen to how the Holy Spirit is working in and through people from other cultures. We may well learn many new things to take back to the MDW.

The significance of this to VM is shown by research work done by Dr David Barrett in the 1960s. In his book, *Schism and Renewal in Africa*,⁷ Barrett claimed that the explosion of independent African churches, which occurred about this time was, at least in part, related to the translation of parts of the Bible into many African languages. It was as though Africans were reading the Bible for the first time for themselves and listening directly to what God was saying to them from His word, rather than listening to what the missionaries were telling them God was saying. This encouraged them to contextualise their faith for themselves, and to tackle the issues of fatalism, ancestral spirits, evil spirits, polygamy and so on which Western missionaries had failed to do effectively.⁸

⁷ Barrett D. (1968). *Schism and Renewal in Africa – An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements*. London: Oxford University Press.

⁸ Barrett D. With the translation of the complete Bible, however, African societies gradually began to discern a **serious discrepancy** between missions and biblical religion in connection with the traditional institutions under attack. The missions were assaulting their institutions, but biblical religion emphatically

This is clear justification for using local languages wherever possible. Giving people the Bible in their own language and sitting back and listening to the way God speaks to them through His Word, rather than telling them what it all means, has not been a characteristic of much modern mission, but perhaps it should be.

Worship

It has been my privilege to worship in a number of very rural African churches. It has been interesting to see the contrasts between two types of singing in the same services. In Malawi I shared in a service in a Presbyterian church with strong Scottish links. The metrical psalms were sung even slower than in some Scottish churches, and with little life. In Tanzania, the set hymns came from the standard hymn book, *Tenzi ya Rohoni*, in which 99% of the hymns are in Swahili, but owe their origin to English or American books such as *Golden Bells* or Again, the singing was limited, partly due to the sparseness of books, but largely through the lack of African rhythm or sentiments. However, once the local choirs got singing their own hymns and songs, in both places, the atmosphere changed completely both in volume and in involvement.

Again, early missionaries only knew their songs of praise from back home. Initially many thought African rhythms to be devilish and wrong. In the 21st century there is no excuse for this. We see our own hymns as being culturally related to life in the MDW, and need to learn not to be so paternalistic as to force them on another culture, even if they are in local languages.

Related to this is the question of forms of worship, which are suited to MDW attitudes and instruments for worship. Much could be said about the need for letting local people find their own forms of worship which reach their souls rather than those of the MDW.

upheld the family, land, fertility and the importance of women, and also appeared to endorse polygamy and respect for family ancestors. p 268.

Not only is this linked to the VM attitude to local languages, it is also related to the question of local finances. When I was working with the African Pastors' Fellowship, I was amazed that when folk wrote to ask for help, one of the consistent requests was for PA systems, keyboards and guitars. There is a feeling that church worship is incomplete without Western instruments. In urban settings this may be more understandable, perhaps, as these are the music and instruments that belong to urban life. But requests were coming from very rural situations that also needed generators, as electricity was not available. No way could local folk afford these items, so in a misguided sense of the superiority of Western forms of worship, local Christians are willing to get into an unhealthy dependency on donors to effect this.

Basic Infrastructure

There are many ways in which missionaries in the past have not only brought the Gospel and their own take on theology to Africa and other places, they have also brought their own culturally related structures. These have included an emphasis on buildings, especially for worship, for theological training and even the care of orphans, the separations between clergy and laity, and denominational issues.

As most workers from the MDW have themselves worshipped in permanent buildings, often expensively decorated, have been to Bible schools or colleges in permanent buildings, and have seen orphans cared for in separate institutions and so on, many have assumed this is the best way to do things. What they have failed to do is to look and see how local folk might achieve the same results in different ways, often much cheaper and much more relevant to the local situations. Encouraging itinerant Bible teachers and assisting care for orphans in the community can ease the dangers of unhealthy dependency and produce more sustainable results.

One of the problems is that people who live in MDW understand orphanages and Bible colleges and so on, and love to give to them. Hence Western institutions become established which local people cannot support, and unhealthy dependency becomes the order of the day. Glenn Schwarz has an excellent section on this in his book '*When Charity Destroys Dignity*'⁹. This is another example of MDW money being used injudiciously and causing problems.

Church hierarchies and denominational issues also suffer from a failure to view how local communities already run and adapting the church procedures accordingly. Too often there is a greater emphasis on reproducing the MDW way of doing things rather than finding the relevant local way.

Finding the Way Out

There have been many attempts to seek to avoid causing unhealthy dependency, and to get out of it once it has been identified. These include the Moratorium on Mission personnel and money of the 1970s, African Initiated churches, Business as Mission, Industrial missions, regionalisations and a host more.

Vulnerable Mission, with its emphasis on local languages and local resources is a valuable part of this process, and will contribute much if more individuals and groups will consider its values and seek to live by them.

⁹ Schwarz, G. (2007). *When Charity Destroys Dignity – Overcoming Unhealthy Dependency in the Christian Movement*. Lancaster, PA: World Mission Associates p 8-9.