

Dependency is a complicated issue!

BY KEVIN HIGGINS

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This edition of *Mission Frontiers* is addressing questions about “dependency.” Raising this in *MF* is fitting, as our focus on movements will naturally take us to the conversation about how movements to Jesus resource themselves, and how they avoid dependency, and with it the flip side of dependency which is “control,” as exercised through the golden rule: the one with the gold makes the rules.

Dependency is a two-sided problem. While mission organizations and leaders rightly caution against creating dependency, and while frequently it is assumed the problem is with those who are dependent, it is also true that some workers use funds and resources to maintain control. In addition, in some cases, the funding provided by outside workers also creates the ongoing need to be involved; so, there are times when both the outside and local partners are dependent on the financial arrangement. I know of cases in which, if it were not for money, workers would cease to have a role at all and might feel that if they don’t give funds they could be in danger of losing the rationale for being involved at all. Ultimately, this could lead to losing the “cause” for which they are raising support, including their own support.

For all of us who raise support (myself included), it is important that we acknowledge that we benefit from a certain type of dependency. So then, is dependency in and of itself actually and always a bad thing?

My view of partnership is shaped by many things, but perhaps most profoundly by my reading of Philippians and Paul’s usage of the term “koinonia.” I was first inspired to dig deeply into this by a colleague in the early 2000s and every time I re-read Philippians, I find new treasure.

The question is: is it a *healthy* dependency or not? My premise? That healthy dependency is part of authentic life in the gospel, and is marked by several things we see in Philippians and koinonia as used there. Healthy dependency is in essence rooted in our total dependence on God, our shared dependence on one another, and also on a shared life lived in service of a shared purpose.

Philippians 1 speaks of a koinonia, a sharing, in the Good News and in the grace that comes from this. (Phil. 1:5, 6) That is directly connected to our common experience of the Good News of God’s grace in Jesus of course, but Paul also does more than imply that our koinonia in the Good News is connected to how we share with each other in its advance. That is, in fact, one primary purpose for Paul in writing Philippians: to share how the Good News is advancing, and how the Philippians have assisted that advance through their giving.

In some ways Paul is dependent on the Philippians, although this is mitigated by Paul’s, I think very sincere, comments about not seeking such a gift and his statements about being content with or without it. Another mark of healthy dependence is in evidence here: giving or not giving does not seem to affect the deeper relational reality.

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Philippians 2 speaks of a koinonia in the Spirit, or in spirit, it is not fully clear which. (Phil. 2:4) Perhaps for Paul the distinction is not as binary as for us. The verse comes at the conclusion of a section in which Paul is highlighting a unity of purpose he hopes the Philippians will more and more deeply share. It is also written in the context of saying things like “looking out for each other’s interests,” and pivots to a whole section about giving up rights and claims and serving one another.

Healthy dependency is rooted then in the heart and example of Jesus, and of a surrender of status and rights. Too often the cautions about dependency are aimed at the supposedly dependent ones. Philippians addresses the heart and value system of the “giver.”

Philippians 3 dives even deeper. In 3:10, Paul writes about his own desire to share (koinonia) in the sufferings of Christ. This is in a section devoted to some of Paul’s most detailed biography and transparent spiritual longing.

Healthy dependency is possible if we are all, together, mutually, rooted in Christ so deeply that we long to share with Him in the hard things, and thus with each other in the hard things.

Philippians 4 speaks most directly to our topic (4:15 especially). Paul speaks of the matter of sharing/koinonia in the area of “giving and receiving.” It is mutual. It is sincere. Healthy dependency is marked by these qualities. It is also helpful to recall the context of Paul’s letter. He writes from prison. He planted the Philippian church. That pioneer planting effort is now what modern missionaries would refer to as “one of his supporting churches.” He is, in this sense, dependent on a church he planted.

A cursory reading of the above, and a look at the articles in this *MF* will be enough to show the reader how vastly different the mission enterprise today is from the pages of the New Testament. This is largely inescapable since our world is vastly different. But I see in Paul what might be called an embracing of dependency. And one of my questions of myself when I reflect on my own life and work is the question, “Kevin, if you were dependent in more of the ways you see in Philippians, how would your frontier church-planting have been different? How would your own spiritual life have been different? How would the movements you see now have emerged differently?”

For me, the question is not whether dependency is good or bad, or how it can be avoided, but what kind of dependency are we called to, and do we, do I, have the courage to embrace it? 

