

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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Missions – the Why, What, and How of Support

Note: This is one of a series of articles intended to facilitate and guide church leaders' conversations about significant issues that often are not talked about among pastors, boards, and church leadership teams.

Prior articles can be found at www.efcawest.org. Click on the Church Leadership tab to get to the archive.

I was talking with a pastor friend the other day about missions, missionaries, and how churches support them. I shared with him my home church's journey where we found that over time we had drifted from actually supporting missionaries to writing checks for missionary support, and the path that we have been taking to return to actually supporting those missionaries that we send out to minister to others. At the end of our conversation I told him our conversation was going to be the genesis of my next article in the Zipline. So, Mark, here it is.

Readers: Please note that I am not differentiating between traditional missionaries, foreign or domestic, and church planters in this article. For ease of reading, I'm using the terms missions and missionary. Feel free to translate to church planting and planters or others you send out and support.

I grew up in churches that supported missionaries. We had missions conferences, missionary speakers in Sunday evening services (I think I just dated myself), and we made sure that we had a certain percentage of the annual church budget dedicated to financially supporting missionaries.

When I began serving as a leader in the church, I found that our leadership team would occasionally comment about a missionary who was going to or coming back from the field or who might be experiencing a problem, but most of our conversations were about the dollars and cents – how much were we sending to which missionary or agency.

Sadly, it wasn't until many years later, that I began to realize that I was missing the point, or at least a major point, of what it meant to actually support our missionaries. We were writing checks for missionaries, but we certainly were not providing the support they needed or deserved. And for church leaders, that's something to talk about

When a church decides to support missionaries, it is important to address the why, what, and how of missionary support. Unless we address at least these three questions, we will most likely fail to provide adequate support. Here are some questions that can jump-start your conversation.

Why? Why does our church decide to support missions in general?

- Is it out of a sense of guilt or fear that God somehow requires churches to set aside a certain percentage of receipts to attain His favor? Is it because one part of our church's purpose to support missionaries to reach our Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and throughout the world? Is it because we are strategically sending workers out to areas where we believe they are needed to share the Gospel and plant churches? Is it because it's mandated or expected by some organization to which we belong?
- Why do we support the missionaries or agencies that we support? There are thousands of missionaries and agencies that clamor for support. Is it because they are the sons or daughters of members of our church, and we feel pressured to support them wherever they want to go and whatever they want to do? Is it because the pastor has a personal passion for an area of ministry and therefore the church is going to do that too, at least as long as the pastor continues to serve at our church? Is it because we believe God has led us to provide this support? Is it because the work to be done fits with the work we believe God has called and equipped this church to do? Why did we pick the ones we picked?
- Upon what basis should we pick in the future?
- Upon what basis would we decide to not provide support or to stop providing support?

What? Once we have addressed why we support and why we choose the ones to support, we should ask ourselves what providing missions support should mean.

- What does our support currently entail, and what should it entail?
- What support do we provide missionaries beyond writing checks? What support do our missionaries and agencies desire from us?
 - Does it include caring about the health and well-being of their families?
 - Does it include caring about their overall financial well-being, including their eventual retirement or return from or conclusion of their work?
 - Does it include their long-term ministry viability?
 - Does it include providing encouragement and emotional/relational support during difficult times?
 - Does it include visiting them in their work environment to help and encourage them, instead of to evaluate and judge them?
 - Does it include helping them establish a communication, prayer and financial support network?
- When we say we support a missionary, what does that actually mean?

How? Having addressed why we do missions, and having addressed what we actually mean by the word “support,” then (and only then) we are ready to determine how we are going to accomplish those things.

- How are we going to provide financial support? Will we do everything from a centralized budget? Facilitate and encourage financial support from individuals? A combination of these?
 - If a small church, how might we partner with other churches in mutual endeavors?
- How are we going to lead this area of ministry? How are we going to accomplish the work and the support systems? Dedicated staff? A volunteer leader? Create a ministry team?
- How are going to stay in contact with missionaries? How are going to build and sustain our relationships? How do we communicate their needs to the church family?
- How are we going to establish and sustain mutual accountability between missionaries/agencies and the church? Note this is mutual responsibility – churches need to exercise care that they don’t establish unilateral or one-way accountability systems.
- How will we establish the relationship between the church and missionaries in such a way that we are actually caring for them?

When a church takes on the support of a missionary, responsibility for their support includes much more than financial support and an occasional prompted and uninformed prayer (“God bless the Joneses and the other missionaries...”). Yet, that’s all that many churches provide for missionaries – unintentionally and likely from inattention or distraction by other pressing matters. Sadly, that was my own journey as a church leader, and I am so thankful that my church’s leadership team and I have grown in recent years and are changing our concept of support to include much more. I wish our leadership team had talked together about this many years ago, and that’s why this month missions support is *Something to Talk About*.

For those who may want to dig deeper into this, David Wilson, missions and young adults pastor, and the team at Trinity Church (EFCA) in Redlands, California, have published a book entitled *Mind the Gaps – Engaging the Church in Missionary Care*. The book is available at Amazon.com. In addition, they are hosting a three-day conference to equip others regarding this topic on March 3-5, 2016. You can learn more about this on their Website, www.mindthegaps.org.

Let us know how your conversation goes. Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at bob.osborne@efca.org.