

WHAT'S A CHURCH TO DO?

The Dilemma of Missionary Funding in a Changing World

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SCENARIO ONE

Todd had grown up at 1st Church. His parents had been part of the church in its embryonic days, before it grew into a large mega-church, and as committed members had raised their children in the church. It was in the youth group where Todd and his siblings had committed their lives to Christ and had been nurtured in their faith.

So after college when Todd determined that God was calling him to serve in cross-cultural ministry in Asia, he had the natural expectation that his home church where he grew up would enthusiastically get behind him and be financially supportive.

Unfortunately that was not the case, and Todd was not prepared for the reception he received.

Todd was told by the missions pastor that he didn't qualify for support from the church for two reasons. First, he had not completed the church's three-year missionary preparatory program and secondly, the region of the world where he was planning on serving was not where the church wanted to focus their resources.

The region was not part of the "10-40 Window" and the church would only give to missionaries going to un-reached people groups in the 10-40 Window.

Todd's expectations were shattered. Of all places, he had expected the church where he grew up to affirm his call. Even if the amount of support they gave was token, the fact that they were behind him and believed in him was important. Todd felt defrauded.

All the inspiration and promotion he had heard emanate from the church leadership over the years about missions rang hollow in light of the church's attitude toward him. The disappointment and disillusionment, for Todd and his extended family, was profound.

SCENARIO TWO

Jerry and Katherine had served as cross-cultural missionaries for twenty years in Eastern Europe. They had become fluent in the language of the nation in which they served, had done an exemplary job of enculturation, and had carried on a productive, fruitful ministry that had profoundly affected the progress of the gospel.

Because of some health issues with one of their children and the simultaneous opportunity to assume a major leadership role with their mission agency where their gifts and considerable experience would be put to superb use, they considered a return to the states. They believed a move into ministry at this new level of influence would vastly expand their leverage and scope of impact.

However, several of their supporting churches and their mission committees didn't see it that way. They took a dim view of such a move away from "the field" and direct, cross-cultural ministry and consequently cut their support. A couple of churches stopped giving altogether.

Jerry and Katherine were stunned that this move ultimately cost them over 40% of their financial support.

SCENARIO THREE

After four years in South America, Robert and Christine had come to loggerheads with the agency with whom they were serving.

They simply could not continue working under the authoritarian leadership style of the country leader and what they considered an antiquated, ineffective philosophy of ministry.

The organizational leadership seemed impotent to remedy the situation. This was not what they expected when they decided to give their lives to

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servicing God in an international context. They felt they were victims of an organizational “bait and switch.”

Despite these discouragements, Robert and Christine continued to believe God clearly led them to this area of the world and were committed to the people of the region. Their only alternative seemed to be to switch to an agency that was more compatible with their values and sense of calling, which they did.

As they communicated with their home church about the impending change, they were surprised to learn that the church would not approve of such a move.

In fact, the church had a policy that would not allow people to make such organizational changes without re-applying for support and going through a comprehensive re-evaluation by the church.

Despite the cost, inconvenience, and considerable time involved, Robert and Christine jumped through the necessary hoops to maintain the support. But in the process, they lost confidence in their home church.

Having been let down by their two major “pillars” of support – their sending agency and their home church – Robert and Christine’s hurt and sense of loss was profound.

These are but a few of the numerous scenarios that routinely face missionaries and church mission committees as they wrestle with whom to support, how much to give, and what are reasonable guidelines and policies about their relationships with individual missionaries and their agencies.

- ◆ How can churches make decisions that are strategic and at the same time, fair and affirming to those who seek and need their support?
- ◆ What type of criteria should be used to determine support levels and whom to support?
- ◆ How should those serving on mission committees and boards in local churches make such crucial decisions?
- ◆ Is there any type of framework that can give objectivity to such a process and at the same time, be sensitive to the real human issues involved?

As I’ve watched this process for several decades in local churches both big and small and across the denominational spectrum, I’ve come to some conclusions that I believe could be immensely helpful in the design of church missions giving.

I call this simple approach the “3-P Plan” and it works for any church serious about their missional responsibility and participation in God’s global agenda.

In 3-P, there are three major categories of consideration, which a church uses to determine their missionary and giving strategy. The three criteria that should be used are:

- ◆ **The Person**
- ◆ **The Partner**
- ◆ **The Place**

Criteria #1 The Person

There are two basic issues that any church should examine when considering individuals for missionary status and support:

1. *What is the level of involvement and commitment to our local body from the individual(s) asking for our support?*

Churches should make provision for individuals who respond to God’s calling on their lives who have been the product of the church’s ministry.

For some churches, this may mean “members.” For some it may mean children who have grown up in the church and are products of their ministry. For others, where such formal criteria doesn’t exist or is not emphasized, there are certainly ways of determining the length and nature of a person’s involvement in the local ministry.

2. *What is our church’s evaluation of the person’s competence and readiness for vocational ministry?*

Do they have the gifts, spiritual maturity, skills, and commitment necessary to do the job that God may be calling them to pursue?

Do they possess the competence and the emotional maturity for the task? Can we confirm this calling?

Can we, like the church in Antioch in Acts 13, with confidence endorse and “set them aside” for such a move?

Do we believe in them and their potential?

CRITERIA #2 The Partner

I assume in this article that the local church has enough wisdom, perspective, and basic understanding of the missionary enterprise that they will seek to work in tandem and partnership with specialized mission entities.

I realize that is not always the case. The phenomena of churches going it alone and assuming the role of “sending agency” is all too common among mega-churches and new denominational movements that have failed to learn the lessons of history.

But that mistake, and the unfortunate lack of theological, historical and missiological understanding it demonstrates, is the subject of another article.

Here, I assume a church knows better and is committed to the type of synergistic interdependence between local church and mission agency that has always contributed to the Christian movement.

When a person from a church chooses an agency, the church should have a role and responsibility to play in this choice. Individuals should not make such decisions independently, uncritically or in a vacuum.

There are two basic questions that a local church needs to ask regarding the agencies with whom they partner and to whom they will send/commend their people for vocational ministry:

1. Does the church have confidence in the basic beliefs, purpose, vision and values of the organization?

I believe a church should certify/qualify an agency as vigorously as they would determine an individual’s qualifications to serve with that agency.

Is the church *really* compatible with this outfit? Can they work in harmony and tandem with mutual confidence and trust?

Do they believe in the philosophy of ministry of the organization and see the entity as an extension of their own values?

This may or may not be the case with denominational boards. There may actually be considerable dissonance between a given local congregation and its denominational missions entity. I believe a church needs to go considerably beyond a denominational affiliation in determining compatibility with mission entities.

2. Is the leadership of the agency responsive to the church?

What is the nature of the church’s interaction with those who lead the agency? Is there good communication? Is the leadership available and willing to meet, dialog, and interact with the church? Can they work together?

I recommend that church mission committees create an actual list of those agencies “certified” by the church as mission partners. These are agencies which the church has “pre-qualified” as the type of entities they *want* their people to serve with. They are the organizations the church prefers to cooperate with on short-term projects and with whom the church would encourage people to go with vocationally, all things being equal.

For smaller churches, this may mean a list of 4-5 agencies. For larger churches, it may mean several dozen.

But there is intentionality and focus to the decision. Churches should not be forced into “shot-gun” relationships with agencies that individuals choose and to whom the church is then forced to respond.

What this also does is clearly articulate to an existing or potential missionary exactly who is in partnership with the church. There are no surprises. If the missionary changes agencies, such as in Scenario #3, they are aware of the church’s parameters *before* such a decision is made and can take those parameters into consideration during the decision-making process.

CRITERIA #3 THE PLACE

The missions leadership of any church, in conjunction with the overall leadership of the congregation, should think clearly and carefully whether God is leading them toward a commitment to a particular people group(s) and/or region(s) of the world in their missionary focus.

No local church can do it all. The effectiveness and commitment to missional activity increases greatly when the church can determine specific, consistent targets of prayer, finances and personnel.

For some churches, this may be by country or region. For others, it could be through the “Adopt-a-People” approach that targets an unreached people group or a particular ethnic/religious designation.

Regardless, it means that a church may have to think strategically and make prayerful choices about what areas of the world provide the right “fit” for them as a group of believers.

If they don’t, these choices will be made for them as God calls people from among them into missionary service.

USING THE CRITERIA

So how do you use the three criteria of:

- ◆ **The Person**
- ◆ **The Partner**
- ◆ **The Place**

to determine whether to send/support an individual and as a guide to help determine the nature and level of that support. Here’s how it works.

A person can be qualified by one, two or three of these criteria. And then each of the criteria is in turn worth 1/3 of the maximum level of possible financial support.

Let’s assume that the maximum a church commits to give is 15% of a potential missionary’s budgeted support or 15% of a fixed amount per missionary unit. Either way, the *3-P Plan* works.

1. If the individual qualifies in the 1st set of criteria ... ‘the person’ ...then they are eligible for 5% support.
2. If the individual is going with a ‘certified/approved’ agency, then they are eligible for an additional 5% support.
3. And if the individual is going to a people-group or area of the world that is one of the church’s strategically chosen targets, then they qualify for an additional 5% support.

And this system works with any combination of the above criteria. For example, someone may approach the church from the outside (thereby not qualifying for the first criteria), but with an approved agency and is going to one of the church’s targeted areas. That would qualify for them to be considered for support at the 2/3 level.

While this simple system works using either a percentage of a missionary’s budget *or* a fixed amount a church determines to give per missionary unit, I usually encourage churches to work with a percentage of the missionary’s budget for two reasons.

First, it’s fairer. The amount it takes for a family to live and minister in urban London is considerably different than the amount it takes for a single person to live and minister in Papua New Guinea. Giving each the same set amount, or percentage of that amount, can be blatantly inequitable.

Secondly, if a church has confidence in an agency and is “certifying” their partnership, then the church should also have confidence in the budget the agency requires for the individual.

I personally know the care, sophistication and integrity that we invest in the budget process for our personnel as an organization, and no one is being misled or taken advantage of by using such figures in their calculations for giving.

Obviously, working with budgeted amounts instead of fixed per/unit amounts takes some sophisticated financial planning on the part of a

church missions committee. It will require accurate financial projections and the net percentage amounts the church is able to commit to per missionary unit may fluctuate from year to year.

IN SUMMARY ... People who are qualified should always be able to count on their local church for encouragement and support when God leads them to serve in the missionary task.

When faced with inevitable changes in venue, assignment or agency, people on the field should be able to depend on churches to use objective, fair criteria for evaluating the continuation of support.

The whims of local church mission committees and the next church election should not threaten the ministry, families, and stability of those who have left it all to Christ. They deserve better.

A simple clear plan, such as the 3-P Plan described here, provides a paradigm where the person, the partnership and the place are all given consideration.

It is objective and removes the potential for misunderstanding and stress between missionary and church. It is a win-win system. It is a system that affirms God's call on individual lives and supports that call in a way that is fair, encouraging, and eminently workable.

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