

## Missionary Communications Engage the Full Potential *by Ellen Livingood*

It's low tech; it's high tech. It launched with the Apostle Paul and is still a regular part of the missions job. It's often considered a chore to produce and sometimes ignored by recipients, yet it is a powerful tool that is undervalued and underutilized. What? The missionary prayer letter and its contemporary cousins—emails, websites, and blogs. While international phone calls, Skype conversations, video presentations, and in-person visits have become more frequent, the majority of missions information still travels via written communication, especially to those most closely connected to missionary prayer and funding.

As the global outreach director of a local church, I saw missionary correspondence occasionally used for maximum impact, but too often its potential was wasted. As a missions mobilizer, I constantly hear church leaders complain that they really don't know what their missionaries are doing or why.

### Agency Focus on Quality Communication

Agencies generally teach appointees a session or two on writing prayer letters and then assume that missionaries will know and practice good communication for the rest of their careers. How could your agency continue to reinforce the importance of high quality missionary letters and electronic mail?

Could you highlight good examples of missionary letters or emails in your agency's internal newsletters? Or be more creative. Recruit a church or donor to contribute a new laptop each year to be given to the worker whose communication is selected best by a panel of judges (another way lay people with specialized expertise could be utilized). Or ask missionaries with poor communications skills to take an on-line writing course as one of their annual objectives.

### Church Responsibility

Meanwhile, church leaders may gripe among themselves about the lack of good communication from those they support, but they seldom sit down with their missionaries and articulate what they want and need. Why not include a gentle

but honest critique of communication when your missions team meets with each worker during home assignment?

### The Missionary Perspective

On the flip side of the coin, missionaries deserve regular communication from their churches, too. I knew one missions pastor with well over 50 supported units who responded personally to every missionary letter. But most workers tell me they never hear from their supporting churches.

Sending the support check regularly is crucial, but so is communicating interest in what your missionaries are doing on your behalf. Rejoice with them in victories; encourage when things are tough. But perhaps most important, tell them how you are specifically praying, and ask questions about what you don't understand so that your workers can better inform you for prayer and greater camaraderie in the task.

Most prayer-letter feedback missionaries do receive comes from family and close friends who respond to the personal information in letters. Taking their cues from these comments, some missionaries focus a significant portion of their letters on family activities. However, if the people who pray and give to missionaries are fed primarily an extended series of updates on children's activities and "where we've been" reports, no wonder their understanding of, and passion for, missions doesn't grow! We as a missions community must take far more seriously the responsibility to communicate well what we are doing, why we are doing it, and, by God's grace, what is resulting.

### More, Not Less Important

Are missionary letters irrelevant in the electronic age? Quite the opposite! Forms may change but written

communication is more crucial than ever. Expectations for frequency and quality of messages are rising. Many prayer letter recipients' workplace responsibilities include evaluating business plans and employee performance reviews. Increasingly they want the same standard of reporting to be evident in missionary communications. Bottom line, many are

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asking whether the work reported in missionary letters reflects the value of their financial, prayer, and interest investment.

What are some of the critical ingredients of letters and emails? Here are some practical suggestions agencies and churches may want to discuss with their missionaries.



### Fit the Message to the Medium

**Letters** (delivered by mail or Internet) **and e-newsletters** are vehicles for telling a more complex story, presenting

overviews, educating the audience, and weaving photos with text for maximum visual as well as content impact. A dwindling number of churches have any effective means of

distributing paper copies of letters beyond the missions team, so sending a stack of letters is a waste of resources. Instead, build a list of email recipients in each supporting congregation or recruit a member of the church to disseminate your letters electronically. The shrinking number of individuals without email can be serviced by an online recipient.

**Emails** are an excellent means of communicating very short, urgent messages with time relevance. But it is important to remember that emails are a “read and delete” communication, unless it is a formal letter attachment to print for later consumption.

Therefore, the effective email contains only one or two ideas presented in just a couple short paragraphs. Give readers a sense that they are friends sitting across the kitchen table sharing the realities of your ministry. A weekly update with a brief summary of what happened from last week’s request and one new prayer item will engage prayer support without overwhelming recipients or creating a burden for the writer.

**Websites** provide opportunity to connect visitors to a broad perspective of relatively static information. They are not designed for communication with churches whose busy leaders lack the time to repeatedly check sites of multiple missionaries to discover if new information has been uploaded.

**Blogs** are the home of frequent, more personal sharing that happens in a sequence of postings. In most cases, blogs attract primarily the younger generations who spend extended free time online. Some feel that blogs are a waning fad.



### Paint the Big Picture

What are the opportunities and needs that demonstrate the necessity of what you are doing? What God-glorifying goals compel your work? What is He accomplishing in broad brush strokes, not just via your efforts but overall in your region, country, or people group? Make it impossible for people to read your letters and not be challenged afresh by the Acts 1:8 mandate.

In this age of information overload, it is critical that missionaries include in every letter something that speaks to their overall purpose and priorities. The golden rule? Never assume your readers remember! Write each letter focused on a hypothetical reader for whom this is your first correspondence. Repeat the basics but in fresh ways.

Help readers understand and pray for you in the core areas of your ministry. Example: Our church has received prayer letters from missionary teachers for years on end without ever hearing from them about what makes MK education crucial. Letter after letter features student missions trips or Sunday ministry in a national church as if their daily teaching ministry is not important or deserving of prayer. But we support their work not because of sidebar outreaches but because (we trust) day after day they educate and spiritually mentor MKs who struggle with growing up “third culture,” separation from extended family, making their faith their own, etc.



### Be Honest

Many workers never reveal personal struggles in their letters. Health issues, physical dangers, or financial needs are “acceptable,” but admitting to battles with bad attitudes, pride, selfishness, or fear is off limits. No wonder we have the missionary-on-a-pedestal syndrome!



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Help your readers learn with you. I laughed and learned from one missionary who shared what God taught her about ownership when she discovered one of her helpers had been using her toothbrush. The best responses

to my own prayer letters come when I share personal vignettes of grappling with difficulties and learning life lessons from a patient Heavenly Father.



### Describe People in 3-D

If you want people to “own” your ministry, you have to help them fall in love with those to whom you minister. Tell stories about the individuals with whom you work—stories that

present them as real people. Take space in your letter to describe their personality and why you care about them. Pictures help, especially close-ups of people in action.

### Explain Purpose and Strategy

Many missionaries underestimate the potential to educate and engage their support team through prayer letters. Those who pray for and fund your work have a vested interest. Don't undervalue their ability and willingness to grapple with the strategy issues of your ministry. Occasionally suggest a book they can read or include a link to an article of relevance.

### Highlight Progress

Most missionary letters represent the writer's here-and-now perspective and are totally disconnected from the last letter.

As you sit down to write, always begin by rereading your last letter and putting yourself in the mindset of your reader. Start where you left off and help them understand the progression of ministry, including the situations in which you feel like you've taken two steps forward and three steps back.

### Ask for Prayer and Follow up about Results

"What prayer requests can I pull from this letter to share with the congregation?" I often asked as a church missions leader. "Where are the specifics?"

I am amazed at how few prayer letters ask readers to join in imploring God to divinely intervene in order to do powerful things through their ministry. Are you as a missionary hungry for others to join you in pleading for God's power to be displayed through your ministry

and among the people to whom He has called you? Does that come through in your letters and emails?

In this era of immediate electronic access, it's exciting to join missionaries in praying for what's happening right now. Yes, we will gladly stop and pray that over lunch tomorrow you will be able to share the gospel with your neighbor. But then write within the next 24 hours and report what happened—even if the response was disappointing. Your email doesn't need to be long or dramatic, but if you value pray-ers' partnership, please follow up. The #1 discouragement to missions praying voiced by church members is that they never find out what resulted when they prayed.

### Reflect the Reality of Your Ministry

Review your letters from the past year. Do they accurately portray your primary activities? I receive letters from some missionaries who sound like they spend all their time attending conferences and entertaining visitors. Remember that your readers will assume you are presenting a balanced overview of what you do and what is most important about

your ministry. This doesn't mean that every letter should detail your schedule; it's more interesting if each issue focuses on one or two aspects in more depth. But over a period of 6-12 months, your letters should represent the top priorities of your work.

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### Present Your Financial Needs Well

Do you write a letter only when you have a major financial need, or does it at least appear that way to your recipients? Do you apologize for sharing financial needs (if so, are you apologizing for God's lack of provision or feeling guilty that you need a team and can't do it all alone)?

Missionary finances are a mystery to most people outside the missions world. Do you explain the specific ways your ministry will be expanded if you receive the needed income or what will be cut if you don't? Readers shouldn't be left to guess the implications.

I find that few of the church leaders who make missions financing decisions understand that low support income usually means that ministry funds are reduced. The people preparing church budgets (as well as individual donors) have the right to know the ramifications of their decisions. Be as specific as possible.

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### Share How Churches Help or Could Be Involved

Has your team just hosted a short-term group that did a dynamite job? Tell their story in your prayer letter to give others ideas about how they could get involved. Analyze your current ministry opportunities. In what ways could individuals or short-term teams contribute to what you are doing? Believe God can provide just the right person(s) for the task and list these "job openings" along with any qualifications and requirements in your letters. Too often church members are under involved because they are under challenged.

### Write Often

A quarterly letter and monthly emails seem like an absolute minimum. The workers who best engage their support team write 6-12 letters per year and frequent, brief emails in between.

### Probe for Feedback on Home Assignment

Most people are reticent to make suggestions unless asked, so take an informal survey the next time you visit donors and the missions teams of your supporting churches:

- What information that I shared in my letters and emails during this last term sticks in your mind?
- Did anything I wrote leave you confused or feeling like you were missing critical information?
- Which of your missionaries does the best job of communicating with you and why do his/her letters stand out? (Ask for copies of the best letters and emails.)
- What kind of communication would you like from me?
- How can I improve in making you an integral part of the ministry God has called us to together?

Honestly share with your churches how much you need to hear from them while on the field. You may want to pass along samples of church letters particularly helpful and encouraging for you, in order to show them how to improve their side of the communications equation.

### Ask Your Supervisor to Write

Once a year, each missionary's direct supervisor should write a letter to that worker's supporters. Content? Why the person's role is strategic, some aspect of outstanding service he/she performed that year (either a major contribution or a small thing that reveals character), what was accomplished because of his/her ministry, and a personal thanks for past support and encouragement of ongoing investment of finances and prayer. A formal letter from someone in a distant office has little impact, but a warm recommendation from a close colleague carries weight.

### Making It Easier

Some readers may feel overwhelmed by these suggestions. Here are a few ways to help make it work:

- ✓ Invite a friend or supporting church member skilled in writing or photography to make a short-term ministry trip to capture stories and reports for you. The "outsider" viewpoint will be helpful in understanding what aspects of the story will be of particular interest to your readers. In the course of a short visit, this person can give you "starter material" for a year's worth of letters as well as your report for next home assignment. Others on your team may be able to benefit from this person's skill, too, and you will have provided a way for him/her to invest God-given communications ability for Kingdom benefit.
- ✓ Recruit the member of your field team who excels in writing to develop material each team member can incorporate into letters. Perhaps you can publish several letters each year that represent the work of the team as a whole.
- ✓ At the beginning of the year, develop a prayer letter schedule and choose the topic for each letter. Later events may amend your schedule, but an effective tool against writer's block is a topic and a set time on the schedule to write.
- ✓ Divide your letter into sections. Include a personal story article, a bringing-you-up-to-date section, prayer requests, and other "chapters" that fit your ministry and style.
- ✓ Develop a list of different approaches that will help you keep your letters fresh: interview, first-person stories perhaps written from the perspective of a national coworker, Q&A, a series of journal entries, a-day-in-my-life, listen in on our meeting/conversation, quotes from others, anecdotes about culture, a photo spread, etc.



*Ellen Livingood, the head of Catalyst Services, is off to write her latest prayer letter with a resolution to better practice her own admonitions about good communication.*

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