

## MISSIONARY ACCOUNTABILITY

### Wrestling with the Church's Challenge to Practice It Well

by *Ellen Livingood*

*Last month's Postings* touched on the issue of accountability, and subsequent emails from readers as well as another presentation of a seminar I lead frequently at ACMC conferences resurfaced multiple questions on this topic.

The issue is multi-faceted and complex. For an article on accountability for national workers see the [Postings article of June 2007](#). The article presented here addresses the missionary-accountability issue primarily from the church perspective. In another place we will approach the questions from the agency viewpoint.

#### WHAT IS ACCOUNTABILITY IN MISSIONS?

The basic definition of accountability is to give a reckoning, to furnish a report. Imbedded in the word is the concept of answering to another who has the responsibility to evaluate what has been accomplished with the resources invested—money, time, or some other element of value. Accountability was the focus of at least two of Jesus' parables (Matt. 25:14-30; Lk. 16:1-13).

When some churches use the term, "accountability," they are asking to stay better informed. They are not looking to evaluate their missionaries' service but just to know what is going on. While both (a) staying informed and (b) holding workers accountable require a steady flow of quality information, what happens with that information is quite different, and therefore it is helpful to differentiate between the two purposes, both for the sake of the church and the missionary. What we discuss in this article is accountability that involves an element of evaluation.

I believe missions-related accountability has three goals:

- **Stimulate worshipful celebration**—To give praise to God and to appropriately commend worthy servants.
- **Maximize results**—To determine what more can/should be done to manage people/funds/other resources so as to achieve the greatest Kingdom effectiveness.

- **Confirm wise stewardship**—To assure those tasked with stewarding resources (primarily churches and missions organizations but also individual donors) that they are investing wisely.

#### Celebration

It is unfortunate that the word "accountability" too often implies some sort of witch hunt for failures. The parable of the talents includes twice as much exuberant celebration as judgment, and that based not on a one-size-fits-all set of expectations but a careful reckoning that takes into account individual differences.

We seldom give enough thought to how churches should celebrate missions. Appropriate celebration isn't built around either missionary hero worship or a superficial count of souls saved. So what does constitute success that should be celebrated? Sadly, our lack of clear expectations

too often makes it impossible to know what or when we should celebrate.

If we cannot answer the question, "What constitutes faithful, successful service at this particular time for this particular missionary/project?" and "Have those standards been met?" Or if we lack people qualified or willing to answer those questions, there is little wonder that we fail to celebrate or celebrate the wrong thing.

“ Well done! ”

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Appropriate celebration is first of all an act of worship. We stop to honor the Owner of All when the talents He entrusted to us have been wisely invested (by church/agency/individual) and strategically used (by missionary/national entity).

Secondly, appropriate celebration of global missions effort provides a sorely needed "well done"—for both those who go and those who contribute via prayer, finances, etc. It is also a means of educating the congregation in what is most highly valued in terms of life investment.

### Maximized Effort

The vast majority of missionaries and other global workers have a passion to be effective, and many, perhaps most, also struggle with a sense of guilt over the fact that they do not have more, measurable results. This can create discouragement and depression, but it can also nurture defensiveness toward the concept of accountability. However, appropriate accountability should be focused around achievable activity goals while at the same time defining prayer requests asking God to do what only He can accomplish. Missionaries cannot be held responsible for fruit that is borne only by the moving of the Holy Spirit, but they should be accountable to do what best prepares the soil.



### Wise Stewardship

It is a sobering reality that one day missions team members and other church leaders will stand before God and give an account for how they have invested their church's people and financial resources. A "well done" on that day depends on wise stewardship today. When church leaders embrace their accountability as divinely appointed managers, they look for quality feedback in order to wisely assign personnel, funds, and other resources for greatest impact.

### ACCOUNTABLE TO WHOM?

While slogging through the support-raising and ministry preparation process, missionaries hear, "Learn to trust God." The unspoken message from many churches is "You're on your own." Yet after they have persevered in what often seems like a solo flight, they arrive on the field to discover that they are answerable to a host of "bosses"—team leader, field leader, national church leaders, various agency headquarters personnel, sending church, supporting churches...the list goes on, and the expectations can clash. No wonder there is often push-back.

In this article, we are focusing only on the accountability role of churches in the sending country. However, it is important to take into account that missionaries are constantly juggling other accountability relationships too.

### CHURCH-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY PRACTICES

If your local church is committed to practicing accountability wisely, fairly, and consistently, you need a plan. Here are suggestions as your church considers your God-given stewardship responsibilities.

**1 Develop written policies that clarify the accountability you expect of your missionaries.** Rather than creating guidelines to address an issue with a particular missionary, in advance establish and circulate objective policies that apply to all. Your policies should include: (a) a list of decisions in which you want to have a voice; many sending churches ask to be involved in decisions related to major change in ministry role, country assignment, and/or agency; (b) frequency and type of prayer/update communications; (c) home assignment time to be spent at or dedicated to the church; (d) completion of regular ministry reports; and (e) length of time for which the church commits support; in the past, churches' support commitments were open ended, but many congregations today are committing to support for one term with the option to renew.

Your policies should be re-circulated to every member of the missions family once a year as a reminder of your expectations. Some churches adopt a [covenant](#) or contract that both missionary and church (and sometimes agency) sign to indicate their commitment to meet the expectations articulated.

**2 Clearly define the role and expectations of sending church vs. supporting church.** Unless your congregation is involved only with workers from your own membership, you probably support missionaries whom you have sent out from your body as well as workers from other congregations. Many missionaries have multiple supporting churches—as many as 30 or 40 in some cases!

“Well Done!”

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For the sake of clarity, major church accountability needs to be vested in the sending congregation. While it is certainly appropriate for supporting churches to ask for regular reports, the primary evaluation and decision-making need to center in the sending body. However, if your supported missionaries are not being held accountable by their

sending churches, then you may need to take a more significant accountability role. You may also be able to assist the sending church to serve more effectively in this area.

**3 Clarify accountability expectations with the mission agency.** If you send missionaries under the supervision of a mission agency, then at the outset you will want to sit down with agency leaders to learn: (a) how missionaries' responsibilities and goals are determined; (b) how the agency practices accountability for the fulfillment of these goals (investigate how accountability is

actually implemented on the field/team where your workers will serve, not just a general statement of agency intent; for example, how frequently do missionaries and their supervisors sit down face-to-face to review goal achievement?); (c) the agency's position on confidentiality (more about this below); (d) how deficiencies uncovered during evaluations are addressed; and (e) whether supervisors' reports need to be individually solicited by the church or whether they will be sent automatically, at least to the sending church.

In most cases, goals should be framed by the missionary and his/her onsite leaders. One of the major reasons for sending a worker with a mission agency is to benefit from the wisdom of highly qualified field leaders. Unless your church has extensive amounts of time and expertise to participate in field strategy development, delegate this responsibility to the agency. However, your relationship with that agency's leadership—both home administration and field supervisors—should be such that you can ask questions about strategy decisions and wrestle through issues that arise with honesty and mutual respect.

**4 Clarify what you will consider success.** On what basis will your church determine whether your missionaries are adequately fulfilling your expectations? It is understandable that workers get frustrated when churches demand accountability from them but do not articulate any standards.

Is it spiritual fruit? That is beyond the control of the worker and varies vastly from “harvesting” regions where the church is growing to the initial “breaking up of hard soil” places where the gospel is penetrating for the first time.

Is it amount of activity? Those in a Westernized country can “do” far more than workers in Developing World settings where just living demands large amounts of time. Another caution is that missionaries can be very busy in activities that are not most strategic.

Is it creating a list of goals and being able to report that each item has been checked off? If so, the Jerusalem Church would have given Philip a failing grade for suddenly abandoning his campaign in Samaria to reach one spiritually searching eunuch in the desert. Some missionary assignments are fairly structured and predictable, but many workers are most productive when they are daily responding to the Spirit's leading and their changing opportunities.

“Well done!”

***Some missionaries need to be held accountable to do less in order that their lives and their families are more balanced and healthy.***

So what are your church's criteria for faithful, strategic service? As stated above, you will want to make sure that situation-appropriate, measurable goals are developed by your workers in prayerful collaboration with their co-laborers and leaders. Then “lean hard” on the follow-up evaluation of your workers' agency leaders. Ask both “what” and “why” questions.

Remember that long-term success in ministry is dependent on the spiritual, emotional, and physical health of your missionaries and their families, and the condition of their relationships with co-workers, other nationals, agency leaders, etc. Some missionaries need to be held accountable **to do less** in order that their lives and their families are more balanced and healthy.

**5 Become informed stewards who listen well.** It will be almost impossible to evaluate your missionaries' service unless you invest significant time in getting to know them, their context, and their ministry. You will want to learn everything you can about the place and people to whom your workers minister. For example, if they work in an oral culture, study orality. If your missionaries serve in a Buddhist context, read a book on Buddhism, visit a local temple, and ask an Asian friend who is Buddhist about his/her beliefs. Talk to other missionaries and organizations working in this region to grasp the bigger picture of what God is doing. Everything you learn will help you better grasp the barriers your workers face and what makes for effectiveness.



Understanding your missionaries' ministry requires regular field visits.

If your church is sending out workers, then part of your financial responsibility to them is budgeting sufficient monies to visit them frequently. My suggested rule of thumb: Visit annually the first two years and at least every other year thereafter. The person(s) the church sends should be excellent listeners with the spiritual gift of discernment. If possible, send a husband/wife team. They will “hear” and analyze different aspects of what is happening in the context and the lives of your workers. Effective assessment means listening to both spouses and to their children, their co-workers, and those to whom they minister.

**6 Adopt standardized report forms.** Some churches ask for a quarterly report and some require an annual accounting. I personally think that a report every six months is a good frequency. When I served as a church missions director, we developed a simple [report format](#) with seven basic questions and one additional one that varied (at budget time it related to finances, but at other times we asked about things like short-term team

needs or missionary-care suggestions). We always told our missionaries that if they had already completed a different form that provided the same general information, they were welcome to submit a copy of that report rather than waste the time amending answers to fit our format.

When you evaluate your missionaries' reports, take into consideration which spouse has completed the form. You may want to ask that both husband and wife answer some of the questions. Also, keep in mind whether your missionaries tend to be "glass half full" or "glass half empty" personalities. Some workers are self-deprecating, and fearful of taking credit they believe belongs to God, they downplay their accomplishments. Without intending to misrepresent their situation, optimists will paint a rosy picture of what has been accomplished. In situations where missionaries are afraid that anything negative will endanger their support, they will report exclusively positive things. Only by knowing their missionaries well will the discerning church be able to interpret the information they receive.

**7 Debrief extensively on home assignment.** Commit an extended period of time during your missionaries' home assignment to meet with them and review their prior term of service. Don't be afraid to ask the hard questions, but do so knowing that your missionaries may already be struggling with discouragement. After serving 24/7 on the front lines of spiritual warfare, many (perhaps most) missionaries come home wounded and weary. Encourage your workers to take the first several weeks of home assignment for personal renewal and evaluation. Unless/Until workers have had some rest and opportunity to regain perspective, they may not be able to accurately review their past term, and any assessment of their effectiveness will be skewed.

**8 Ask your missionaries' agency for a third-party evaluation.** This report is usually most accurate and most useful if it comes from the supervisor directly responsible for your missionaries. An evaluation completed by a headquarters staff member thousands of miles from the onsite work is seldom specific enough to be helpful. Most churches ask for an annual evaluation from the agency. Your church can provide a [questionnaire](#), but you can explain that you are happy to accept another format if the agency already has a standardized report. The value of this agency input depends on the thoroughness with which the evaluation is done and the willingness

to share honestly. (See the discussion of confidentiality below.) Few missionary supervisors have had management training, so many approach the process of evaluating their peers with inadequate skills and great hesitance to critique workers they know are serving in difficult circumstances. If your church has members with expertise in personnel evaluations, they may be able to provide some valuable training in this area.



**9 Address the thorny issues of confidentiality.** The disclosure of information about your missionaries' work has both legal and emotional overtones that complicate the accountability process. Mission agencies have been sued by disgruntled missionaries who accused them of libel when they revealed

some negative performance information to their churches. As a result, some organizations flatly refuse to disclose anything. On the other hand, some agencies have shared reports with churches which have then misused the information—circulated it indiscriminately among the congregation, and/or made rash judgments based on inadequate assessment of the larger picture. Because of such cases, both missionaries and agencies often are reticent to allow the church into the personnel evaluation loop.

Finding a middle ground on the confidentiality issue is not easy, but transparency and respect for the individual's privacy can coexist if there are mutually acceptable standards of reporting, protecting, and assessing information. Churches should establish clear guidelines and clarify to missionaries and agencies who in the church will receive copies of ministry reviews and how this information will be handled. Agencies and missionaries must be able to explain how ministry review information passed along to

churches will be accurate and helpful without violating employer/employee relationships.

**10 Try to distinguish missionary care from accountability.** Most people want to be able to confide in someone who is not their boss. For missionaries, both their agency leaders and their church leaders are in a supervisory role, and make decisions about their assignment and financial support. To provide missionaries with confidants and encouragers who are not involved in assessment, many churches have established [advocate teams](#) to fill these roles. Missionaries and advocate team members covenant that the information shared stays within the advocate team unless there is a breach of moral standards, or there is potential danger to the worker or others that must be addressed.

“ Well done! ”

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Accountability, on the other hand, is handled by the missions team or a personnel subcommittee of the missions team tasked with this responsibility. However, it is important to remember that the sending church, especially its leaders, is also responsible to provide pastoral care for these workers. Accountability and care must be balanced in every aspect of the missionary/church relationship.



**11 Invest in growth.** Establish an atmosphere of accountability that prioritizes the steady improvement of your missionaries' life skills, ministry ability, and assignment fit. Clarify to your workers that the identification of areas of failure or inadequacy will first be addressed by asking how you as a church can come alongside them to increase success. Your investment may take creative directions: Your church may send a short-term worker who can fill some gaps (for instance, help organize an office, fix computer problems, or engage in peacemaking). Or you may be able to sit down with agency leaders and missionaries to adjust their role to better utilize their gifts. Perhaps you can pay for additional training to increase your workers' skills in a particular area, or assign a mentor who will hold them accountable for personal growth in an area of weakness. Your missionaries will be far more comfortable being honest about their inadequacies if they know that your goal is to help do whatever it takes to make them successful.



**12 Be accountable to your missionaries.** Yes, accountability flows both ways. What are your commitments to your missionaries? Will you periodically [rate yourself](#) on how you are doing and share your improvement goals and "report card" with your missionary family?

For example, each report your missionary fills out deserves a thoughtful, personal response. Many missionaries express frustration that they regularly complete extensive forms for their churches but never receive so much as an acknowledgement that they have been received, much less any indication that someone has read and seriously considered what they have written. Make it a priority to send a personal note in response to every accountability report.

If you expect monthly or quarterly letters from your missionaries, are you communicating with them equally often? Can your missionaries depend on your support check always arriving on schedule? If you ask them to spend extended time with you on home assignment, do you also provide

comfortable housing for their stay? Do you generously cover the costs of their travel to be with you? Do you plan the schedule so as to use their time really well? Note that the sample policies and covenants we have provided (see #1) include the church's commitments TO their missionaries as well as their expectations OF them.

**13 Expect change and be flexible wherever possible.** In today's world, change is inevitable. Perhaps you sent workers to the field for a certain ministry, but by the time they completed language studies, they felt called and/or their agency wanted to assign them to a totally different job. Or after a period of successful ministry, they are invited to accept a leadership role that will take them out of the ministry for which you had sent them. While it is appropriate for the sending church to have input in such major decisions and in some cases to say "no," in other situations, it may be the church that needs to recognize that God is leading these workers in a different direction. What will achieve the greatest Kingdom benefit? Perhaps it is the church's strategic priorities that need to be stretched or adjusted.

**14 Decrease or eliminate missionary support carefully.** If the accountability process never impacts the church's stewardship of its God-given resources, then it is reporting but not true accountability. Clarify to missionaries and agencies that your decisions will hinge on this process—and then consistently apply your standards. Be aware that even if you announce this clearly, any changes may be met with astonishment on the part of workers who may persist in the belief that support is a commitment for life.

You will want to adopt a multi-step plan for implementing change: First, make sure that any missionaries who are not meeting your requirements are fully aware of what you consider to be serious shortcomings and inform their agency supervisor as well. Second, if there is a possibility that the issues can be resolved, offer to work with your missionaries to address your concerns within a stipulated period of time. If your workers accept, your church is responsible to invest the time and resources to help them meet the standards. This may mean making trips to the field, paying for counseling or training sessions, etc. Third, if the workers do not respond or will not/cannot meet your expectations, and you determine that your appropriate course of action is to decrease or eliminate their support, provide advance warning and extend their funding until their next home assignment, if at all possible.

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If you reduce/drop support, make sure that your missions team all fully understand the reasons for your decision.

Write out a short paragraph of explanation for your actions. It is wise to have several people review this statement and then provide it to your missions team and other leaders so that they can answer questions from members of the congregation. Do not publish such information in printed or electronic form.

**“ Well done! ”**

**...stand with them in front of the congregation and summarize the achievements of their past term, expressing your appreciation for their faithful and strategic efforts.**

**15** Share your missionaries' strategic goals and celebrate their work well done. As your missionaries share their concrete goals and priorities, enthusiastically articulate key action steps to your congregation. This information will increase their understanding of what missions is all about (the average person in the pew has only a vague idea of what a missionary does) and help them pray specifically. As missionaries later report on how they have fulfilled their ministry commitments, you can share these accomplishments with your congregation—their prayers and gifts have had a major role in making this possible, and celebrating progress will encourage them to redouble their efforts.

When missionaries visit on home assignment, stand with them in front of the congregation and summarize the achievements of their past term, expressing your appreciation for their faithful and strategic efforts. Yes, it is important to let the workers speak for themselves about their work, but many times because they are humble and/or battling discouragement, they seldom convey adequately the great job they have done. How affirming it is for missionaries to hear someone from the church commend them publicly for specific work completed. This also confirms that you have been paying attention to their reports, and it underlines what you consider strategic.

At the same time, you will want to acknowledge how God has blessed their work in ways that are totally beyond your missionaries' efforts, underscoring that He has moved in response to the congregation's focused intercession. After all, your people are also accountable before God for their role as the home support team. When accountability goes full circle, deserved commendation glorifies God and challenges everyone to renew their commitment to the greatest cause in the world.

*Ellen Livingood launched and leads Catalyst Services to further church/agency collaboration. She is available to help your church develop and implement an accountability process.*



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