

Supporting Home Staff

Should churches fund headquarters personnel?

by Ellen Livingood

Many mission agencies require their home staff to raise missionary support to cover all (or a portion of) their salary. Those who are moving from a field assignment to an administrative role ask or perhaps almost expect their donors to continue the same level of support. Those just joining the mission in a home-staff role challenge churches and individuals to support them the same as they would a frontline worker.

In recent years, some churches have decided to consider home staff in a different support category. Their new policies generally reduce or eliminate funding for those in headquarters positions.

On their part, agencies and home staff view administrative roles as essential. So it is understandable that they have struggled to accept churches' resistance to supporting headquarters personnel. In this article, we will seek to clarify some of the issues with the ultimate goal of initiating a healthy dialog.

Let's begin with one thing we can agree on: We all want mission agencies to be led and managed well! And this certainly requires home staff.

After all, second-rate administration dishonors the Lord of the Harvest, puts workers in jeopardy, wastes funds, and is an embarrassment.

So we all want quality missions leadership—it's why we send workers with agencies in the first place. We expect excellence in financial stewardship. We believe that it's important to provide good missionary care and quality training and we want personnel matters handled carefully.

However, it is not as easy to come to consensus on how to achieve those goals, how to measure them, and how to fund them. Funding overhead expenses—including the support of home staff—cannot be divorced from issues of quality leadership and management.

In fact, the home-staff support issue may exist partially because we haven't sufficiently addressed the wider issues.

To begin solving these issues, we need to listen carefully. Both church and agency raise some valid concerns related to mission administration and home-staff support. These issues directly or indirectly impact our decisions about funding

those in administration. Once we better understand the issues, I believe we can come to some shared conclusions and brainstorm fresh solutions.



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Revisiting Church Policy and the Choice Not to Support Home Staff

Various factors may influence a church to eliminate or reduce home-staff support. It can be helpful to reevaluate the rationale on which such a policy rests.

Location is not a valid criterion for determining who is serving in an administrative support role.

Most churches determine who is home staff based on where they live. But today a worker's address is not necessarily a deciding factor in what type of service they perform. Many

administrators and support staff live around the world. For instance, a regional director may live in Singapore or the US; an accountant may work in Bogotá or Toronto. At the same time, frontline staff may live in their “home country” but spend the majority of their time traveling to ministry locations where they make crucial, hands-on contributions. Therefore, location does not dictate whether someone is in a support position.

Let’s not exclude home staff from the missionary family.

To remove those filling administrative roles from the category of missionary can send a message to the congregation that such tasks are second rate. In today’s missions enterprise, we recognize the importance of all gifts and want to emphasize that God uses all vocations, so it seems even more inappropriate to make role distinctions in the missionary family. Web designers are not inferior to Bible translators. Computer specialists are as essential as church planters.

In addition, to remove home staff from membership in the church’s “missionary family” usually effectively removes them from the church’s intercession. Agency home staff are in the spiritual battle, and they need prayer support and church encouragement.

Home staff can be motivational. Some churches do not want to support home staff because people doing “desk jobs” don’t excite the congregation about missions. But there is no direct correlation between where a person serves and how effectively they communicate. We all recognize that some on-the-field workers are painfully poor communicators while their home-based counterparts may inspire everyone.

Granted, supporting a majority of home staff could skew a church’s perception of the diversity of opportunities in missions today. On the other hand, eliminating all such personnel from support seems equally lopsided.

Churches need to be realistic about the cost of underwriting good leadership and management, whether via home-staff support or other types of investment. As noted at the beginning, we all want to see mission agencies led and managed well. One aspect of



good leadership is good stewardship that controls overhead. But no matter how well an organization is managed, administrative costs are a reality and require funding.

Typically, agency overhead costs have been covered from three primary sources:

1. Designated support for individual home-staff workers
2. Administrative deductions from missionary support and project contributions
3. General-fund giving and bequests

To eliminate the home-staff support income stream would be to place a greater demand on one or both of the other sources. No one wants to increase the amount of funds missionaries must raise. And in recent years, most organizations have found that a decreasing

number of individuals and churches are motivated to give to cover overhead expenses.

To wrestle adequately with these issues, we need to raise some concerns that go to the agency side of the equation.

Identifying the Weaknesses of the Home-Staff Support Model

Many churches would agree that underwriting a portion of overhead costs (whether via home-staff support or other means) is legitimate. However, in recent years they are increasingly uneasy because so many of their best people have been redirected from the frontline ministry the church sent them to do and assigned instead to administration. One

church leader recently described as a “constant fight,” their church’s efforts to maintain what they feel is a healthy balance of frontline workers to support staff.

Agencies, do you understand these concerns? How are you

addressing these issues and demonstrating to churches your commitment to streamlining administration in order to concentrate resources on global priorities? Here are some specific issues that concern churches.

Sending churches deserve a primary voice in determining workers’ assignments. The question of funding home staff is secondary to the issue of whether the person is in the right role. Was the sending church involved in the change of assignment? A growing number of churches today believe that the local church, not the para-church

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organization, is responsible to fulfill Christ's Acts 1:8 command. They believe that the sending church is responsible to confirm the missionary's God-given gifting for missions. This includes speaking into major field-assignment decisions. Therefore, the home-staff funding question is overshadowed by the prior question of whether the church was in agreement about the change from field- to home-staff assignment in the first place.

Staff placements must be driven by qualifications not by funding.

In recent years, church leaders have become uncomfortable with what they perceive to be a willingness on the part of mission agencies to put square pegs in round holes in terms of personnel assignments. They point out that individualized funding sets up scenarios where it is easy for people to be given roles not based on competence but on the fact that they bring with them dollars to pay their salary.



In these situations, the support-raising worker may be less gifted for, and therefore less productive in, the role than someone else who could be hired for the position. But the dollars are attached to the person and the agency has no leverage to better invest them in hiring a person with more capacity for the task. Therefore, the agency assigns the supported worker to the role because regardless of competence, there is some net gain from the person's services which are "free" for the agency. While mission agencies are not solely responsible for this funding system, churches are rightfully distressed when they perceive funds and personnel are poorly invested.

Churches must have confidence that agencies are practicing excellent financial stewardship. The missions community is asking tough questions about what constitutes effectiveness and wise stewardship of missions funds. As churches choose agencies with whom to deploy

their people, they increasingly want partners who demonstrate organizational excellence.

Some agencies have made major strides in setting and maintaining high standards in leadership and management, but stories of poor administration still surface too frequently.

The tensions around supporting home staff, or underwriting headquarters' functions via any means, cannot be resolved unless agencies are demonstrating to church leaders that they are good stewards.

Starting with a Foundation of Trust

The issues outlined above may suggest that churches and agencies are far apart on important issues. But I believe convergence is possible if we lay some groundwork. Where do we start? Here are some suggestions.

1. Begin the conversation

Frustration and a sense of distance too often mark the church-agency or the church-missionary relationship, especially when it comes to finances. Honest, gracious, face-to-face discussions of the issues are too infrequent.

Regardless of whether you wear the hat of church, agency, or home-staff worker, pick up the phone and initiate a conversation. Define your common goals. Look for ways to encourage. Be honest about your concerns.

Share your heart. Don't begin with money, rather begin with relationship.

Start Listening and Sharing by Checking Out Our Blog

In this week's "Worth considering..." [blog post](#), we share one missions pastor's frustration over the lack of an appropriate context in which to work together on these types of issues. Read his comments and share your reactions.

2. Agree on some standards of excellence

Church missions leaders and agency administrators need to sit down together to define expectations. What does good missions administration consist of? Are there measurable

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benchmarks of quality leadership? The process of hammering out these guidelines can create opportunities to utilize the expertise of church members trained and skilled in similar functions in business, education, government, or other fields.

3. Work together on new solutions for efficiency and funding

Agency leaders could invite to their headquarters the missions/outreach pastors of several of their key

churches along with at least one sharp business person from each congregation. The purpose would be to wrestle with administration and overhead questions. The agency would need to be as transparent as possible about administrative priorities, costs, income streams, etc. How would the church representatives suggest funding home staff as part of the larger picture? What would they suggest doing differently? How could expenses be reduced? What creative funding models could be explored? Are there collaborative opportunities with either other missions or for-profit businesses that might be productive?

Put all of the cards on the table. Listen. Pray. Dream. (Churches/ Businesspeople: Listen carefully and don't be too quick to come to conclusions. Appreciate the complexity of the challenges agencies face.) Together boldly create some pilot projects addressing at least some aspects of the challenge. Does the agency have the will and capacity to change? How will the church help?

4. Design creative partnering between church and home-staff workers

Missionaries moving to a headquarters role have the opportunity to reframe their relationship with their supporting

churches. What could reciprocity look like now? In what ways could the home-staff person enrich the church's missions ministry? How could the church invest multiple gifts to help their worker succeed in their new role? Building a rich relationship will create a whole new scenario in which to consider funding.

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What's Your Conclusion? Should Churches Support Home Staff?

Churches need to carry their fair share of legitimate overhead costs. This funding can take many forms. For some churches, sup-

porting home staff is the best way to do it. For others, another type of approach, or maybe a combination of giving methods (see ideas below) will better engage people's hearts, talents, and funds.

Regardless of how you contribute, consider how you can initiate a new model of collaboration in the process. Bring

together partners in creative, productive new ways. Include a financial investment but focus on expanding many types of mutual benefits.

Brainstorming Practical Ideas

On the following pages are a few ideas to stimulate your thinking. What new options could you consider?



Brainstorming Practical Ideas



Home Staff Missionaries

1. Many field workers build advocate teams which serve as an essential liaison with their sending congregation. An advocate team has just as great potential for you on home staff, if imagination is applied to your new circumstances. Prayer is no less needed. Practical help can take many forms.
2. Invite your senior pastor or missions pastor/leader to visit you at your agency. Have them shadow you for a day and meet your colleagues to better understand the function of the home office.
3. If your assignment includes overseas trips, take your senior pastor or missions pastor/leader on a trip to the field with you; make them a part of all you do as you travel. Help them see the connection of your role to frontline ministry.
4. Take responsibility to educate your church's missions leaders about your role. Help them know what won't get done if you don't do it and what will happen if you are there. Clarify what ministry will be sacrificed if other monies are diverted to cover your salary. Have someone in your agency draft a strong case statement including the above.
5. Make a funny video about your new job. Recruit some younger marketing people in your church to help you make it. Share it with all of your donors and prayer partners.
6. Offer your skills to your church in person and long distance. View yourself as a part of your church's team. Consider tithing your time to your church.



Agencies

1. If you are considering moving a worker from the field to home staff, include sending-church leaders very early in the discussion. Ask them, don't just tell them, about the decision. Talk openly about finances, but make money secondary to the discussion of roles and outcomes. Invite the church to send someone to headquarters to meet with HR leaders, the department the person will be assigned to, etc. Be ready to defend your rationale for the change without being defensive. Respect the church's perspective.
2. Make investing in their sending/supporting churches a significant part of every home staffer's assignment. This will take proactive planning on the part of each supervisor and home-staff worker.
3. Look for ways to reduce costs by sharing services with other agencies and ministry organizations. How could you combine your efforts to increase efficiency and benefit from economies of size? Let churches know you are aggressively working to reduce overhead and invite their partnership.
4. Consider sharing staff with local churches. "Embedding" some of your home-office personnel on a church staff will create a whole new dynamic of partnership.



Churches

1. Look for one of your agency partners willing to brainstorm with you, especially one headquartered nearby. Prayerfully seek ways they and you could combine strengths and resources to provide quality leadership and management for missions. Could that mean sharing facilities? Sharing some personnel hours? One local church decided to bless other organizations by having every staff person volunteer a day per week for another ministry. The cross-pollination was highly valuable for all partners.
2. Take on an agency headquarters project just as you take on field projects. Perhaps it is refurbishing a department. Or asking your business travelers to tithe their frequent-flier miles to the mission agency for one year. Or underwriting a training conference. Or establishing an “administrator on loan” program that partners with a local corporation to embed an executive in the agency for several months. Be creative.
3. Sponsor a fun fundraiser to support a younger missions home-staffer from your church. It might be a “Ride for Rachel” bike ride, a “Yard Sale for Melissa,” or a “Golf for Andrew and XYZ Mission” event.
4. Fund a year-long “fellowship” at an agency to be filled by a gifted young adult from your congregation.
5. Utilize home staff as cross-cultural experts. A worker returning from field service has valuable skills you need to reach the world that has come to your doorstep. Former field workers are poised to resource and perhaps lead a powerful new phase of your church’s global ministry that will take place right in your community.

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