

POSTINGS

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Revisiting Advocate Teams

The concept of developing an advocate or Barnabas team for every missionary has been promoted for a number of years. Many churches have seen the value in the basic concept: Build a team of people who take responsibility for promoting the worker's cause in the church (the advocacy aspect) and providing personalized care (the Barnabas aspect).

Yet when talking to missions leaders in local churches, I have discovered that too often advocate teams either never get off the ground or have spotty success. As many churches focus more of their energy on partnerships and strategic initiatives, the practical connection to individual missionaries may receive even less attention while the need for strong linkages is greater than ever.

Are advocate teams really a good idea? I think so. Then how can we clear the hurdles and update the concept for a new missions era?

Overcoming Advocacy Obstacles

Listed below are some of the problems voiced most often with some possible solutions.

Never Getting off the Ground

Many missionaries never establish an advocate team in the first place or identify only one or two people who never coalesce into a team. Sometimes this is because the workers themselves don't understand the concept. Others feel awkward recruiting people to serve their own needs.

Making the missionary responsible to recruit their own team is usually the best approach, but the church needs to introduce the concept broadly to the congregation, letting them know that building a team is one of the missionary's tasks before they go to the field or when they return on home assignment. Once such teams have become a visible part of the global outreach program, the process is easier to replicate.

In many cases, it is helpful to hold an introductory session for potential team members. In that setting, a representative of the global outreach team along with the missionary can present the purposes of the advocate team and emphasize the importance the church places on the advocate team's work.

Uncertainty about Tasks

Advocate-team recruitment sometimes flounders because potential members can't visualize what they would do. Often the people best suited to join the team are those who like well defined expectations. Just saying, "You will be responsible to care for your missionary," is too vague to convince people with the gift of helps that it is a fit for them. Asking them to read a book like Neal Pirollo's *Serving as Senders* can help clarify the kinds of assistance needed.

Ill-Defined Advocacy Role

Many advocate teams function almost solely in the care area. They may prepare home-assignment housing and send care packages to MKs, but they aren't sure what being an advocate looks like.

The global outreach team can assign an advocate team specific opportunities to keep their missionary in front of the congregation. In addition, the team should be challenged to dream up varied approaches for missionary promotion such as:

1. Setting up a booth or table in the church foyer once a month or once a quarter with different presentations—a food to taste from the worker's country, a children's quiz with prizes for correct answers, a demonstration of how to greet people in the language and style of the worker's people group, a Christmas in July project, etc.
2. Preparing truly creative PowerPoint announcement slides that grab attention, stimulate prayer, and (equally important) note answers.
3. Recruiting a children's class to adopt the missionary, then visiting once a month to talk about them, share requests and answers, teach about the country in age-appropriate ways, etc.
4. Writing and presenting a short skit about one challenging aspect of the missionary's life or ministry to be shared with the congregation on Sunday morning, at the missions banquet, or during the women's retreat, etc.

Succumbing to Inertia

It's easy for the global outreach team to launch advocate teams and unconsciously assume they will keep running forever. Teams need regular connection to the broader mission program and to each other. Some churches add each advocate team lead-

er to their global outreach team. Others appoint one member of the GO team to serve as liaison to advocate team leaders.

Bringing together team leaders once or twice a year for cross-pollinating and encouragement is highly effective. Grace Covenant Church of Austin, TX, has 25 advocate teams, but Pastor of Global Outreach Tom Sanchez is quick to point out that the hard part is keeping them functioning. Grace Covenant brings together one person from each team on a quarterly basis. “Getting together in the same room, talking about what is working and what isn’t, and encouraging each other really helps to maintain momentum,” Tom notes.

Unrecognized Service

Advocate teams need to be thanked and encouraged. An annual appreciation luncheon after a Sunday service, or a picnic in the park are good ways to acknowledge the work of advocate teams, confirm their crucial role in the success of field ministry, and challenge them to recommit to the task.

Advocate teams should also occasionally be commended by the pastor from the pulpit. When intercession is offered for missionaries in a worship service, it is appropriate to also pray for their advocate team from time to time. When the missionary is commissioned or recommissioned for service, why not commission the advocate team too?

Lack of Empowerment

Few advocate teams feel empowered to aggressively address financial needs. Yet this is the group most aware of opportunities for special projects that would significantly advance the ministry and who are most sensitive to personal needs.

Invite the team to advocate for their missionary’s financial needs when the missions budget is being developed or ask for approval to raise the money for

special financial projects such as a new vehicle. The global outreach team might also want to designate a modest amount of funds each year as “seed money” for the advocate team’s use in funding all or part of a project of their choice.

Leadership Loss

Some advocate teams fail because they rely on one strong leader who moves away or for some other reason has to relinquish the responsibility. Starting with a larger team will mean the group is more likely to have the resources to surface new leadership and survive such a departure.

Insufficient Interaction

Frequent phone calls between the advocate team and their worker are essential. While a few missionaries may not be accessible, the vast majority of workers now can Zoom or Facetime. At least one church underwrites the cost of a satellite hookup for their isolated missionary because they view regular contact as so crucial.

The advocate team also needs to interact about the issues their worker grapples with every day. Part of each meeting can be devoted to expanding their understanding by discussing a chapter of a book or pertinent article, or by inviting a special guest with expertise in the political situation, culture, or religion where their worker serves. Team members can stretch their vision of their own role with books like Neal Pirolo’s *The Reentry Team* or William Taylor’s *Too Valuable to Lose*.

Freshening the Advocate Team Concept

How can we make advocate teams more attractive and effective in our 21st century environment?

1. Shift from Team to Community

Younger generations are all about community, and advocate teams can develop a very strong sense of community if they are created to function in that way. The key is recruiting people with the understanding that the group is designed to be a community with strong commitment to each other as well as to the missionary. A community group must be recruited early enough in the new worker's pre-field preparation time or the worker's home assignment period to develop strong relational ties before their departure.

Community often is best achieved when developed among a group which already has strong bonds. The only disadvantage to this approach is that the extant group may not include some of the specialized gifts that would be helpful to have on the team.

2. Broaden from Missionary Focus to Mission Focus

Advocate teams have traditionally centered on serving the missionary and their personal needs. As many churches change their outreach philosophy to concentrate on end goals rather than simply on the sending of a worker, it is natural to also broaden the

scope of advocate teams to embrace the accomplishment of whatever task the missionary has been sent to do.

3. Consider the Moravian Model

The Moravians took missionary sending seriously. Small groups of families would band together to send and support one couple on the field. While their family was on the frontlines, the others saw themselves as equally important members of the team. At times, families would rotate from the sending side to the field side.

This sense of shared responsibility attracts younger generations, especially when integrated with a business development plan that generates funds in a community setting. While their model is just beginning to be tested, at least one missionary family is supported emotionally and financially in a shared business/church arrangement.

4. Get the Team on Site

Regular visits to the missionary on the field can now be a realistic and energizing part of the work of the advocate team. Grace Covenant encourages their advocate teams to make such trips. In fact, they include a line item in their budget for advocate team travel so that they can supplement, as needed, what team members raise themselves for such a trip. These visits impact both worker and team.

First-Hand Report after an Advocacy Team Trip

Two couples traveled to Texcoco, Mexico, to spend a week with Grace Covenant missionary Cindy Bishop. As part of their advocacy team, our purpose was to be an encouragement to Cindy in three ways:

1. Deliver needed items for her ministry (digital camera, craft supplies, new puppets, and parts for a larger puppet stage)

2. Partner with her in ministry (one of us taught a lesson to the women's Bible study, two demonstrated self-defense skills to the youth, and yet another taught a Bible study in a housing project).
3. Help with general maintenance around her home (computer updating, installing a simple water line from her cistern to her washing machine, hanging pictures, building the new puppet stage).

Once we arrived, however, Cindy told us that our main goal was to help her relax. She had just completed a busy six weeks: conducting vacation Bible school, assisting with the youth summer missionary program, and helping orient a new family coming to join the ministry team.

Cindy acknowledged that she has a hard time slowing down, but she said that hosting us in her home

was not a stress to her because, as longtime friends, we allow her to be herself in ways she cannot with the people she serves. With us, she did not have to be "on" as a minister.

As much as Cindy appreciated the tangible tasks we completed for her, the time of enjoying her friends was of the greatest value to her. Not long after we arrived, Mike coined the phrase, "We're right on schedule," and we repeated it throughout the week whenever Cindy apologized for some delay or change in plan.

Our schedule was to meet Cindy's need for relaxation—mission accomplished! Along the way we also experienced the pervasiveness of the spiritual darkness which holds many people in Texcoco in bondage. We are privileged to be a part of this work as we serve as advocates for Cindy's ministry.

See next pages for a sample advocate team description.

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A Sample Advocate Team Description

This outline can serve as a template as you develop a plan for your church's advocate teams.

What Is an Advocate Team?

An advocate team is a group of individuals (typically 5-10) who take the responsibility to coordinate our church's support and encouragement of one of our missionaries (single, couple, or family) and to serve as their advocates to the congregation. The team is our primary link between the missionary and the rest of our body. Because of the strong personal relationships, the missionary can be open and honest, allowing their team to see needs and share successes and defeats.

Why Is an Advocate Team Important?

All missionaries we send out serve on behalf of our local church. They do not go to the field "alone." Third John 6-7 admonishes believers: You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out.

An advocate team is the most tangible expression of our church's commitment to support in such a worthy manner those we send out.

What Is the Advocate Team Responsible to Accomplish?

There are two major aspects of the advocate team's work: care and representation.

Care: Many workers live in physically challenging environments. Some are raising children far from extended family. Others struggle with cultural adjustments and language barriers. Most significant, all serve on the frontlines of spiritual warfare. Daily they are challenging Satan's domain. For survival and spiritual health, each missionary needs the assurance that they are not alone, that there are others in their sending body who love them and are committed to their welfare and also to the success of their work.

Missionaries need empathetic listeners—compassionate, caring friends who are not in a supervisory role. The advocate team can consistently provide that kind of spiritual/emotional care. Caring also involves identifying specific needs which the team can meet or organize others in our congregation to meet.

Represent: The advocate team also champions the missionary and their work to our church body and advocates for ongoing participation in that worker's ministry even when they are far away. Thanks to the efforts of the team, our church feels an ongoing sense of connection that keeps us involved in the life and ministry of the worker.

What Are the Advocate Team's Tasks?

Pray. Individual members pray consistently—if possible on a daily basis—for the worker and encourage congregation-wide prayer.

Meet. The group comes together as a team at least once every two months. The agenda may consist of calling the worker for an update and prayer, then discussing a previously circulated article on missionary stress, planning for a booth featuring the missionary at the upcoming missions weekend, and brainstorming items for a care package to be sent to the family's college-age MK during finals week.

Create a safe place. The team establishes an atmosphere in which the worker feels comfortable enough to be honest and vulnerable concerning their situation and needs. High standards of confidentiality are required; if the worker shares a personal concern they want to remain within the group, each team member must be faithful in maintaining confidentiality (except in situations where our church policy requires that for moral or safety reasons the information must be shared with the proper authority). The team is not expected to act as

A Sample Advocate Team Description continued

professional counselors; if in-depth spiritual or psychological help is needed, the worker should be referred to a pastor or professional counselor.

Maintain communication. The team stays in regular communication with the missionary both on the field and on home assignment for the purpose of (a) keeping up to date on prayer requests and answers, (b) learning of practical needs our church might be able to help meet, (c) monitoring the worker's physical, mental, and spiritual health and (d) keeping the worker up to date about what is going on in our church. If at all possible, the team calls/Zooms/WhatsApps the worker during each meeting. Between meetings, at least one member calls so that the worker has phone contact at least monthly.

Provide deputation help and advocacy. A new missionary appointee should be assisted with the challenge of building their support team. The group can provide advice and aid in the development of presentations for various ages and settings, offer childcare, set up computer databases, etc. Some advocate teams send a representative with their appointee to each meeting at other churches in the area. There they serve as moral support and prayer partners, and when appropriate, they introduce the appointee and share our church's excitement about their future ministry. The advocate team can also introduce and recommend the worker to potential individual supporters.

Coordinate on-Field Service. As the advocate team becomes aware of a need our church could meet, they identify an individual or group within our church body who could provide the solution and make sure that the plan is carried through to completion. The team can recruit one or more small groups, Sunday school classes of various ages, or small groups to "adopt" the missionary for a period of time. Then the advocate team serves as a resource to their class to sustain a flow of information and involvement.

They can also make sure that cards and care packages are sent regularly to the worker and their family. Some advocate teams also help plan short-term trips to serve alongside their missionary.

Update the GO Team. The advocate team is responsible to communicate pertinent information regarding the worker to the global outreach (GO) team.

Represent to the Congregation. While the missionary is on the field, the advocate team works with the GO team to keep their ministry and needs before the congregation and smaller groups within our church. This may include Moment for Missions updates, Sunday school and small group presentations, PowerPoint announcements, bulletin and church newsletter blurbs, etc.

Assist with HA Plans. The advocate team helps the missionary with the practical logistics of home assignment. This could include finding housing and a dependable vehicle, enrolling children in school, scheduling medical appointments, and many other tasks related to successfully transitioning to our area. If the worker is not returning to the field, additional assistance may be needed in long-term reentry and adjustment.

Other services may be appreciated during the missionary's time at home: childcare, training in how to use a new computer program, funds to send children to camp, etc. The advocate team can help or recruit others to serve in a myriad of ways.

Help with Reconnecting. The advocate team assists their missionary to integrate back into the life and care of our church when they are in our area. This could include holding various events where the missionary can report and be reintroduced to the congregation, assisting children to be welcomed back into age-appropriate activities and friendships, preparation of media for presentations, etc.

What Is the Missionary's Commitment to Their Advocate Team?

An advocate team is most effective if the missionary is willing to be honest and open with them about their needs—spiritual, physical, emotional, and financial. When the worker admits that they are struggling with a problem or have a practical need, the team can assist in finding and implementing a solution.

A Sample Advocate Team Description continued

Who Leads the Advocate Team?

The advocate team is accountable to the GO team which, with the missionary, selects the team leader. This person helps to recruit others, schedules and leads meetings, coordinates tasks, and in general is responsible for the efficient function of the team. The leader also serves as a liaison to the GO team.

How Long Does the Advocate Team Serve?

Ideally, each person on the team agrees to serve for one term of the missionary's service, i.e. until the worker returns for their next home assignment. There is usually a 2-4 year period of time.

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