

The Home Assignment Triangle

by Ellen Livingood

The concept of a “sending triangle”—where the church, agency, and missionary coordinate their efforts in the fielding of workers—is receiving growing attention. More and more churches are taking seriously their sending role, and agencies are recognizing the benefits of working in collaboration. See [“The Church/Agency/Missionary Sending Triangle”](#) (the July 2007 *Postings*) for an introduction.

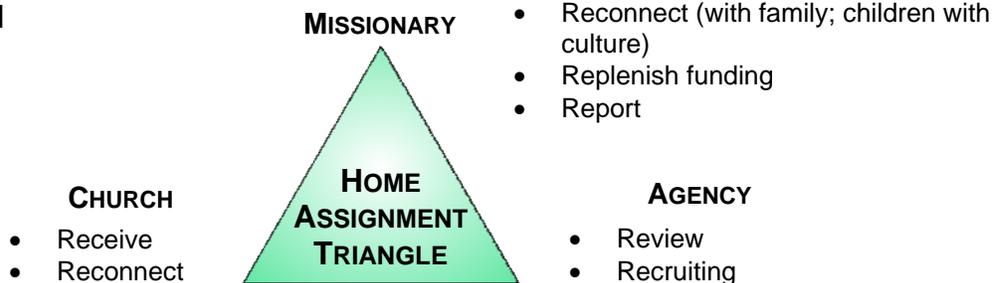
While stronger connections have improved certain aspects of the sending process, much more consideration and energy needs to be focused on how this cooperative relationship should function in relation to missionaries’ home assignment (previously called furlough). To their credit, many churches are doing more to help address the housing and vehicle needs of home assignment (HA) workers. At the same time, many agencies are better addressing returning workers’ physical, spiritual, and emotional health needs.

However, more cooperation needs to facilitate the defining and balancing of home assignment purposes as well as in the way the three entities work together to reach them. If not, we will continue to see the home assignment casualty rate climb.

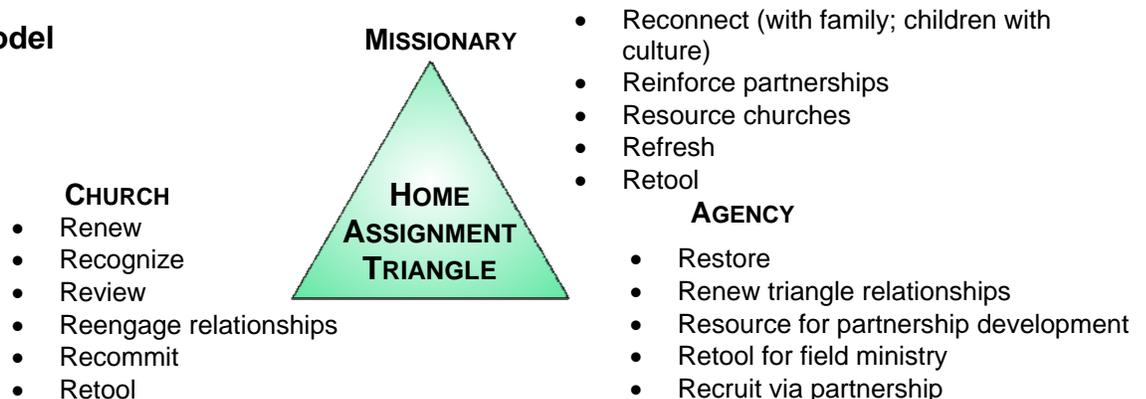
Who are the casualties? Missionaries returning to the field exhausted after trying to jam too many visits into short home assignments with little or no time to rebuild their internal resources. Workers discouraged and sometimes resentful that they must always be asking for money from churches they perceive to be increasingly apathetic about them and their work—churches which may not even cover the skyrocketing cost of travel to visit them. Churches with dwindling missions involvement due partially to superficial interaction with missionaries who have time to merely “fly through.”

Two Very Different Home Assignment Models

The Traditional Model



The Partnering Model



Let's look at the shifts required for each entity in this newer model.

The Shift in Missionary Perspective

From:

- Reconnect (with family; children with culture)
- Replenish funding
- Report

To:

- Reconnect (with family; children with culture)
- Reinforce partnerships
- Resource churches
- Refresh
- Retool

Reconnecting with family and reconnecting children to their "passport country" culture (for most MKs, their parents' sending country is not "home") has and will continue to be the primary concern or at least the emotional priority for missionaries. With short home assignments more and more the norm, workers/agencies/churches need to consider how to provide sufficient time for reconnecting to occur.

The need to **replenish funding** is currently the overriding weight and worry for most workers who raise their own finances. Too little consideration has been given by churches or agencies to the emotional toll taken by the chronic need to raise more support and the conviction on the part of many workers that it is increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to raise that money in the time available on HA.

Closely associated with the funding crisis is the reporting crisis. For decades, **reporting** has been the staple ingredient of missionary HA service in churches. Unfortunately, some missionaries still return to their sending country assuming that they should be able to discharge their major responsibility to churches by telling their story to the congregation. Those days are gone, and most workers blame the lack of platform time. While that is one factor, it is not the core change.

Two deeper realities have altered missionary/church communication: First, in this information-overload world, people consciously or subconsciously filter out information unless it has a high degree of personal relevance: "Is this message important enough for me to add it to everything else I must remember?" "Does this information have any impact on my life?" Understanding these filters and how to get past them are key for missionary communicators.

Second, immediacy is assumed. In our world today, crucial information is delivered almost instantaneously and repeatedly via small bites/bytes. A report once every two or four

years seems quaintly irrelevant. This environment of instant, constant communication demands that almost all reporting be done through a regular flow of information from the field via (in order of priority): visits from church people, emails (by reason of ease and frequency), live video/audio feeds, pre-recorded videos, and lastly, letters.

Then how can workers meaningfully connect to 21st century churches on home assignment? It must be through **reinforcing partnerships** (or developing them from scratch). At least a partial antidote to the funding and reporting crises for church-supported workers is the move to partnership at a fundamentally deeper level.

How do partnerships affect funding and reporting?

- Funding: Home assignment looks entirely different for workers whose sending church assumes or at least shares a major role in raising needed funds. Not only do their HA schedules look dissimilar, but their attitude toward deputation is radically different.
- Reporting: Isn't information communicated in the partnership model? Yes, but the content is encased in relationship (both to the worker and the ministry) and relevance (the members of the congregation are actively involved).

In addition, recruitment of more workers, an important HA element for some missionaries, becomes a natural part of church dialogs in the partnership model.

Resourcing churches must become a major priority for HA missionaries. Workers need to accept that their responsibility includes not only field ministry but mobilization of congregations back home. This will heavily impact what they do in churches, as well as their overall schedule and focus.

This task can seem daunting, and many missionaries may prefer to demur, saying they never signed up for this role. But the reality is that in light of increasing need, strictures on agency funding for specialized mobilizers, and missionaries' natural connection to churches, the responsibility will increasingly fall to the field worker.

Refreshment needs to be added without apology to the list of tasks for workers on HA. All entities in the triangle need to be involved in determining what kinds of refreshment are needed and how to help workers return to field ministry ready for effective, healthy service.

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Retooling is the last item on the list, not because it is least important but because in this age of life-long learning, education can and should happen throughout ministry, not just on HA. However, in most cases, it should be proactively factored into the HA experience, even if it is only a weekend

conference. Again, all triangle partners need to address the questions, “What do these workers need in order to go back thoroughly prepared for their next term?” and “How can we make sure they get this training?”

The Shift in Church Perspective

From:

- Receive
- Reconnect

To:

- Renew
- Recognize
- Reengage relationships
- Review
- Recommit
- Retool

In the old paradigm, the church’s role was simple. They **received** workers back with a warm welcome, and **reconnected** via a 30-minute report in a well-attended Sunday evening service. In recent years, sending churches have recognized the importance of amending those roles to include helping to discover housing and a vehicle for home assignment, and trying to connect workers to smaller groups within the congregation. But even this expanded activity falls short of meeting missionary needs.

The church’s first responsibility is to its workers, and a key question they need to ask is, “How can we make this home assignment a time of **renewal** so that our missionaries are ready to return to the field (or move on to the next phase of their lives) as well prepared as possible?” This question puts the church into a proactive role rather than merely a reactive stance regarding the home assignment. It catapults the congregation, especially missions leaders, into grappling with the overall purpose as well as the scheduling of these months.

To answer the renewal question, church leaders must first determine the well-being of every member of the family. Renewal involves not only spiritual, physical, and emotional health—critical and sometimes complex questions of themselves—but also sorting out financial and ministry issues.

Accurately assessing needed renewal involves the cooperation of all sides of the triangle. Missionaries, church leaders, and appropriate agency personnel need to communicate—in person, if possible, or by phone—on these issues. If the agency does not contact the sending church (as recommended in the agency perspective section below), it is prudent for the church to initiate such a contact.

Recognition is the privilege and responsibility of the church that is too often overlooked. While some workers are highly appreciated by those to whom they minister, many slog day after day in hostile environments. Fruit may be slow in coming, and discouragement a regular foe. Home assignment, particular the return to the sending church, needs to be a time of enthusiastic recognition and a celebration on the part of the church for faithfulness, fruitfulness (to whatever degree it has occurred), and service on behalf of the congregation. Churches need to be intentional and creative in recognizing every worker’s service both in public and in the more intimate circle of the missions committee.

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Reengaging relationships is absolutely crucial to meaningful ministry cooperation. Reporting in the old style is gone, but reconnecting to old friendships and building new ones is paramount. As noted above, relationships thrive in an atmosphere

of partnership. Some responsibility for healthy personal connections belongs to the missionary, but the church, too needs to be very proactive in setting up environments in which relationships blossom for its workers.

Review is a very appropriate part of HA for the church, although it should take place regularly throughout field service in different forms. Missionaries should be pleased rather than intimidated by the fact that the church takes its stewardship responsibility seriously and exercises its right to ask the worker hard questions during the HA interview. In-depth partnership occurs only when the tough issues can be discussed in an honest, face-to-face setting.

▲
*In what ways has
God equipped the church’s
members to contribute to
achieving the next term’s goals?*
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If all members of the triangle agree to continue partnership (which should not be automatically assumed by missionary, church, or agency), **recommitment** is the next step. Careful planning needs to determine what that cooperative effort should look like in the future. What are the specific objectives the worker is being

sent back to undertake? Does the church fully understand and own them? If so, in what ways has God equipped the church’s members to contribute to achieving the next term’s goals? How can partnership be most effective for all?

Lastly, how can the church and missionary **retool** to best accomplish these goals? How can the church help the worker prepare for increased effectiveness? How can the worker train church members to be most valuable in this work

together? Unless retooling activities are built into the HA schedule very early, they are likely to get postponed and eventually eliminated by the tyranny of the urgent.

The Shift in Agency Perspective

From:

- Review
- Recruiting

To:

- Restore
- Renew triangle relationships
- Resource for partnership development
- Retool for field ministry
- Recruit via partnership

In the past, mission agency involvement in workers' home assignments was fairly simple. They usually **reviewed** the past term's work, then provided literature for **recruiting** more people into the agency. Fortunately, in recent years, many agencies have broadened their purpose of HA. **Restoration** has become a priority as agencies have come to better understand the need for effective missionary care. **Retooling** for improved and/or expanded ministry is also a growing aspect of agency service to workers; HA is seen as an opportune time to get specialized training.

Renewing triangle relationships needs to become a larger aspect of HA connection for agencies. A strong, three-strand cord may have existed when the worker went to the field, but two, three, or four years, later, it is quite likely that pastoral and/or missions leadership has shifted in the local church, and changes have occurred for the worker and agency as well. This is a key time to reconnect the vested members of the triangle and expand the cooperation.

Reconnecting with the sending church could begin even before workers return. An agency letter could encourage the church's missions leaders to begin rethinking their HA role and invite them to meet in person or by phone with the appropriate agency person and the worker soon after he/she arrives home. This visit/call can clarify shared home-assignment goals and discuss how each partner can contribute. With the workers' permission, an end-of-term evaluation from the field could be provided.

One aspect of the agency/church/missionary discussion needs to be agency commendation of specific noteworthy accomplishments of the workers to the church. It is a

huge morale boost for missionaries to physically hear their agency commend their ministry to their church. Likewise, the church very much needs to receive third-party confirmation of a job well done. Such acknowledgement can be sent in writing, but enthusiastic, verbal compliments are important and should also include a genuine thanks to the church for its aid throughout the prior term.

This conversation needs to focus on specifics about the needs of the workers and their family. How can missionary/church/agency work together to assure optimum preparation for return to effective ministry? This is a great opportunity to explore with the church the new HA model and the role of all partners. It is much easier for the agency to articulate the church's partnership responsibility, especially for finances and resources, than for the missionary to do so.

As the agency promotes strengthening partnerships, it also needs to **resource** workers to know how to develop them. Missionaries need in-depth exposure to partnership concepts, and to be trained to use practical partnership resources and other church mobilization tools.

Lastly, the shift to this new model will also change the **recruitment** conversation. Agency and workers can collaborate on how to utilize partnerships as avenues for developing long-term workers.

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In this limited space, we have only been able to scratch the surface in introducing new relationships for the home assignment triangle. Catalyst is available to provide personal assistance in unpacking the implications of these new models for your church, your agency, or your missionaries.

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