

Choosing Sending Partners—2 new options for churches fielding workers

by Ellen Livingood

In last month's issue of Postings, we considered 10 key areas where a quality agency partner adds value as churches field cross-cultural workers. While the majority of Western missionaries are still sent according to that model, there are a growing number of other options in today's global setting.

Three Focal Points of the Sending Process

Let's identify three components of sending cross-cultural workers. Your church will assume key responsibilities but you may choose to delegate others.



1. Church—Most of the missions community now agree that the core tasks of sending missionaries are the responsibility of the local sending church. These essentials include confirming gifting and readiness, and providing pastoral care and multi-faceted support.

2. Home-Base Entity—This organization takes responsibility for functions such as screening/training for cross-cultural ministry, handling finances and legal matters, and often certain aspects of care. These home-country responsibilities have traditionally been carried out by mission agencies. But today they may be handled by the sending church, by an organization that specializes in providing home-base services only, or by a traditional agency willing to function in this more limited role.

3. Field-Base Entity—This organization or group takes responsibility for providing on-the-ground leadership, accountability, fellowship, and some care. For most of the history of modern missions, this on-site coordination was also handled by the home-base mission agency. But today these roles may instead be filled by a national church, an NGO, a majority-world mission agency, or more informally by a field-based team or network. Even for missionaries who serve under a traditional agency arrangement, a growing number are developing relationships with field-base entities which provide more of their accountability and colleague/team support than their mission agency does.

A Plethora of Creative Options

Today some churches assume all three of these roles, taking full responsibility for their people. More frequently, the sending church partners with one agency that serves as both home-base and field-base entity (see last

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month's *Postings*), but other combinations are becoming increasingly practical and effective. With a mushrooming global missionary force, exciting new field partnerships, and hundreds of Majority World entities leading new efforts, other options can offer viable alternatives.

For agencies, separating home-base and field-base functions can be complex, and there can be legal issues as well as practical ones. But some are leading the way in new collaborative connections. Wycliffe is now known as the Wycliffe Global Alliance to recognize the fact that their work is directed from a diverse number of global entities that bring different resources and expertise to the work of Bible translation.

For local churches wanting to maximize the impact and wellbeing of their cross-cultural workers, the new choices mean they will want to carefully weigh various options. Then together with their missionaries they can select wisely from the growing number of models and potential partners. It's also important to understand that the arrangement under which workers' service begins may likely shift one or multiple times during their ministry.

The Need to Choose Wisely

Some churches are capable of handling all of the sending, administrative, and oversight responsibilities themselves. But living and working in a cross-cultural setting is now more complex, and at the same time, the demands on church staff and other leaders in the sending congregation are also growing more intense. Without strategic partners, few churches have all of the expertise and resources needed to take and keep their missionaries at maximum productivity and personal wellbeing.

For churches who believe they can send alone, there are two key questions:

- Do you know what you don't know? A good number of churches which initially sent workers on their own later discovered there were aspects to the responsibility they didn't comprehend.
- Even if you can send alone, should you? Will carrying all of the base- and field-related responsibilities reduce the time you have for key sending tasks and local missions endeavors only you can do?

If your church is wrestling with questions as to the best way to send your workers, here are some questions to help you in your choice of models and your search for partners.

One missions pastor found himself making an emergency trip to the field to help his church's missionaries through a crisis involving sensitive political issues. "What am I doing here?" he thought to himself as his flight took off.

He told me later, "It was a wake-up call that I and my church were not prepared to deal with such complex issues, nor did we have the time to do it well enough."

While this church wanted to be very hands-on involved, they realized it was far more practical to "outsource" strategic, field-related responsibilities by sending their workers in partnership with a competent agency.

Questions for the Church Considering Sending Alone

1. Are you looking to send workers for shorter periods of time (two years or less) or longer? Sending longer-term workers involves additional responsibilities and decisions. If you are sending shorter-term workers, what will be your model if they want to stay longer?
2. Do you have church leaders who have lived overseas for extended time and therefore understand well the demands of cross-cultural life and ministry?
3. Do you have the leadership and resources to establish and implement a crisis intervention system appropriate to the context?
4. What on-field decision-making involvement do you anticipate the church will have? Are you committed to sending your decision-makers to the field often in order to understand the context and gain sufficient perspective for such a role?
5. Are there certain types of expertise you will need to engage from the larger missions community? If so, what? Are you prepared to underwrite the real costs of this assistance?
6. Are you resourced to provide in-depth care for your workers and their family—not just spiritually (while this is the most essential), but also physically and emotionally?



7. Are you fully aware of the challenges of meeting government regulations in both your country and the nation where your workers will serve? If you determine to meet these requirements through the establishment of a new, not-for-profit entity (in the US, a 501c3), are you well versed in the long-term demands of running such an entity? Are you sure there is sufficient reason for creating yet another organization when similar Christian ministries have proliferated by the thousands in recent years?
8. Do you know what you don't know? Talk to seasoned workers about what types of support they think your church needs to be able to provide in order to maximize your workers' ministry and nurture their well-being.
9. Are you convinced that your church can provide the continuity of leadership and support needed over the long haul? What contingency plans can you put in place so that sudden, unexpected changes in your church will not jeopardize delivery of the support and care your workers need?



One church had recently sent its own workers into a very challenging ministry setting when unexpectedly the two key church leaders who possessed both the vision and the expertise to oversee this responsibility left the church. The missionaries faced a crisis, realizing that they were suddenly on their own to find their way in a difficult ministry environment. They had no assurance of leadership or financial provision from back home.

Eventually the church pulled in another leader capable of helping them fulfill their sending responsibilities, and the situation stabilized. Nevertheless, it was a stressful time for church and workers.

For years, one proactive missions church has been sending short-term workers directly to their national partner organization in Kenya. Now they have an individual who wants to go longer term.

"We suddenly realized that neither we nor our Kenyan partner were equipped to handle all of the aspects of preparing and fielding our new missionary," the outreach director told me. "We are scrambling to find an organization that will work with us to fill in the gaps."

Questions for Churches Seeking a Partner to Assume Home-Base Responsibilities

Consider the following as you search for a home-base partner:

1. What specific types of services are you seeking from this organization?
2. Will your workers be actual members of this organization? If so, will they be eligible for all member benefits and services even though they will not serve on the field with this entity? If not, will they feel like second-class citizens?
3. What will be the financial arrangements to procure the services and benefits you desire? Are these negotiable now? In the future?
4. Will your workers be officially seconded to your field partner or how will the accountability system be shared? What will be the financial arrangements?
5. What requirements and expectations will the organization have of your missionaries? For instance, during pre-field preparation? On home assignment?
6. Does your prospective home-base partner have similar arrangements with other churches/workers or is this unique? If there are others, how successful have they been?

One church reported, “We have a lot of missions experience in our church and because we were familiar with the on-the-ground work, we sent our first missionaries without other sending/receiving partners. But we discovered that this was a mistake.

“Our workers needed a stronger connection to colleagues, and we needed someone on site who would help us care for them and in other ways make their ministry as effective as possible. We have decided it is worth it to work with a partner agency.”

Questions for Churches Identifying a Partner to Assume Field-Base Responsibilities

Your church may be looking for a field-base partner because you are handling the other sending functions yourself, or because your mission-agency doesn't work in the location or ministry targeted by your workers. Here are some important questions:

1. What is the leadership style of this organization? If the majority of the members/leaders of your prospective partner are primarily of another culture, leadership issues may be defined and addressed very differently from Western models. For example, many cultures are more hierarchical than democratic. Can you adjust?
2. What are the expectations you and your prospective partner bring regarding accountability? Again, different cultures vary drastically on this issue. Do you understand and will you accept how they operate? If you are asking for exceptions to their usual approach, do all key participants understand completely and agree wholeheartedly?
3. Does your potential field partner have experience in understanding and working with Westerners? For example, if you anticipate your missionary serving directly under the national church, has a national leader studied in the West or worked extensively with expat colleagues? Do they have a history of successful partnerships with other Western churches?



4. Are the financial arrangements clear? Westerners usually live at a much higher lifestyle than their colleagues from other parts of the world. Is this acceptable? How will the awkwardness and discrepancies be honestly addressed? If your workers will be expected to live as their colleagues, is this realistic? Will it tend to hamper or shorten the length of their ministry?
5. Who will decide when and for how long your workers will return to your country for home assignments and vacations?
6. What decisions concerning your workers do you want to be a part of? Is this truly acceptable to your prospective partners? How will it happen in a way that is comfortable for all parties?
7. What are the expectations for type and frequency of communication? And can key conversations and written communication occur in English at a sufficient comfort level for your partners? If not, how will the language barrier be overcome?
8. Are you aware of all of the financial costs associated with your partner's accepting your workers? Will you cover those expenses? How? How will they be reviewed and adjusted in the future?
9. Will your worker actually be a member of the field-base entity or more of a guest? What are the implications of either?
10. How will you handle crisis intervention?
11. Have you walked through various “what if” scenarios to surface hidden expectations that need to be addressed up front? Example: What if your workers decide to leave the field? Will the ministry collapse or is the organization committed and able to continue it even without your personnel?

Some Final Suggestions

Don't make your decision based solely on finances. Merely avoiding the cost of agency administrative fees is not a good rationale for going it alone or working with a partner which requires no financial remuneration. You may end up paying a higher price in other ways.

Step back and look at the big-picture perspective before you decide that your veteran workers no longer need to serve with an agency. A “missionary brain drain” will reduce the effectiveness of mission agencies. It may also hamper their ability to field new workers and serve churches that may not have the resources that you have to go it alone. What will most effectively serve the Kingdom?

The best sending model may vary from worker to worker. Revisiting the choice of sending partners every time you field a worker may be time consuming but will likely lead to the best match for each situation. Some workers are more independent and easily manage multiple accountability systems. Others need more consistent structure in order to thrive. And don’t forget to take into account the entire family—their needs should impact what types of partnerships work best.

Customized relationships demand more maintenance. Any sending partnership requires work on the part of all parties to keep it healthy, but special arrangements increase the demand for monitoring the collaboration to make sure it is working for all involved.

***Catalyst** would be happy to help your church work through questions related to how to develop the right partnerships to send your workers. Contact us for more information.*

New Challenges for Agencies

All of these (and other) alternative sending scenarios create challenges for you as you consider your multi-faceted role in fielding missionaries in the days ahead. What will it take for you to be flexible enough to facilitate at least some of these new types of partnerships? How can you

help prepare your field personnel? How will you handle the costs?

***Catalyst** would be happy to work with you as you expand your ability to engage creatively with the wealth of new ministry contexts opening before us. Contact us for more information.*



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