

POSTINGS

articles for missions mobilizers



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Church/Agency Marriages

**Rethinking how to
work together well**

Throughout the history of Western Protestant missions, the missions agency and the local church have been tied together in purpose and function. As in any good marriage, the church and agency bring distinct gifts to the relationship, and when the marriage is healthy, they are more effective together than they would be individually. Many churches and agencies have had decades-long relationships that have served both work and workers well.

But it's easy for partners at times to take each other for granted, fail to communicate, devalue the contribution of the other spouse, and on occasion, even move toward divorce. So too with church/agency partnerships. As internal and external forces change the context, it's time to revisit what builds healthy partnerships and what defeats them.

PHILOSOPHY AND FUNCTION

Effective church/agency relationships require compatibility on both the theological/philosophical and

functional levels. The **theology/philosophy issues** may revolve around such things as the definition of missions, the balance of global/local involvement, the priority of focus on the unreached, the relationship of proclamation and presence, and the role of the sending church. Or it may center on missiological issues such as contextualization, the relationship to national leaders on the ground, and strategies that shape development and avoid dependency. Agreement on these broad issues is essential but beyond the scope of this article.

What makes church/agency partnerships **function** in a healthy or unhealthy way? The lists below highlight from both agency and church perspective what helps and hinders effective partnership on this level.

As you review these relationship builders and busters, consider:

1. Where you most need to improve, and
2. What initial steps you could take to collaborate more effectively.

AGENCY PERSPECTIVE ON PARTNERING WITH CHURCHES

+ What churches can do that facilitates collaboration

Preach/Teach the biblical basis of missions. Pastor and missions leaders intentionally and regularly keep God's vision for the nations before the congregation. Missions is integrated into the heart of the church's vision, goals, and programs for all ages.

Prioritize continuity of involvement. The church leaders maintain missions focus and funding commitments even when launching major projects such as church plants and building programs.

Screen applicants. The church takes seriously their responsibility to send well-qualified workers by screening out those not qualified, and by investing in building character and ministry competence in those whom the church has prayerfully determined are potential workers.

— What churches sometimes do that makes it difficult for agencies to partner

Lack careful leadership transition. The church appoints new missions leaders without adequately informing them of the background of current agency relationships. Poor transitions require extensive time and energy from the agency to start from scratch in building partnership with new leaders.

Make financial end runs. The church sends funds directly to the field rather than through the agency in order to avoid administrative fees.

Lack transparency in references. The church glosses over a candidate's personal or ministry inadequacies on reference forms with the hope that the agency discovers the deficiencies and takes full responsibility for determining the candidate's suitability for missions service.

+ What churches can do that facilitates collaboration

Invest in personal relationships. In order to provide quality, integrated support, the sending church engages in three-way dialog involving church/agency/missionary to build collaborative understanding. Church leaders take time to get to know key agency staff and policies, whenever possible via an in-person visit to agency headquarters.

Generously finance. The church provides a significant amount of monthly financial support for those missionaries they send from their own body and fund extra projects for these workers to the extent possible.

Share pastoral care. Designated church caregivers walk alongside their missionaries by providing on-field and home-assignment pastoral care in collaboration with the agency.

Communicate around the sending triangle. Throughout their missionary's service, the church makes sure that there is transparency among church, agency, and missionary on important issues and decisions. If the church perceives a problem, they discuss it confidentially with missionary and agency to seek resolution.

Engage with contemporary agency challenges. The church takes time to learn the challenges that agencies grapple with in today's fast-changing global and missions context. They encourage new paradigms such as the sending of Kingdom professionals, global networking, etc.

Avoid duplication. Before launching their own non-profit to fulfill their vision, the church researches whether an existing agency can facilitate a ministry or project.

— What churches sometimes do that makes it difficult for agencies to partner

Block access. In an effort to protect staff schedules, some churches make it difficult for agency personnel to interface with church leaders responsible for missions. Both sides must respect each other's time but create space for dialog.

Micromanage. Church leaders attempt to control details of field ministry instead of delegating them to the on-site leadership.

Make unilateral decisions. Church leaders make decisions about moving or removing their missionary from the field without fully discussing the decision with agency leaders.

Fail to listen. The church sides with their missionary when there is a personnel conflict without listening to the agency and/or other team members' perspectives.

Resist funding agency overhead. The church desires all monies to go to the field missionary and avoids responsibility to help fund administrative costs.

Refuse end-of-service decisions. The church rejects any decision to remove a missionary from the field or from a particular assignment in situations where the worker is no longer effective.

CHURCH PERSPECTIVE ON PARTNERING WITH AGENCIES

+ What agencies can do that facilitates collaboration

Practice local-church sending as an agency value. The agency affirms to all missionaries—from applicants to senior workers—their conviction that the local church is the biblical sending agent for global workers and consistently practices full involvement of those churches.

Build appointee's expertise. The agency provides high-quality, pre-field preparation, especially in culture-crossing skills and areas directly related to the worker's anticipated cross-cultural ministry.

Prioritize leadership excellence. The agency invests in building effective leaders across the organization who have gifting, skills, passion, and authority to provide strategic leadership and accountability for those under their oversight. Leaders are selected on the basis of gifting not seniority.

Nurture all-around health. The agency provides adequate health-care coverage including mental-health care. They debrief workers regularly in order to detect and deal with personal and ministry issues before they adversely impact missionary flourishing or ministry effectiveness. They invest in building and maintaining healthy teams.

Set performance standards and reviews. The agency requires and assists each missionary to develop clear goals and a plan for achieving them. They conduct supervisor reviews at least every six months with written feedback. They provide an honest ministry review to the sending church (and others as requested) at least annually.

Provide for retirement. The agency provides a retirement program that underwrites a modest but adequate senior living income without dependence on ongoing church support.

— What agencies sometimes do that makes it difficult for churches to partner

Downplay role of the local church in sending workers. Directly or indirectly, the agency encourages appointees/missionaries to consider the agency as the primary sender and the local church as slow, undependable, and largely irrelevant.

Set low acceptance standards. The agency accepts unqualified or unprepared workers which creates a drain on colleagues and the overall ministry.

Fail to involve the sending church in assignment transfers. The agency approves missionary ministry changes without consulting the sending church.

Unilaterally clear workers for departure. The agency approves departure for the field (for appointees) or return to the field (for workers following home assignment) without consulting with the sending church on readiness.

Devalue life-long learning and mentoring. The agency fails to institute and implement policies that provide space and funding for learning opportunities for everyone from the board of directors and CEO to the newest missionary.

Undervalue church expertise. The agency believes that only full-time missionaries have expertise and wisdom useful in field strategy development and decisions. They downplay the potential for others from the church to contribute significantly via short-term involvement or distance engagement.

Force-fit assignment to avoid releasing. The agency appoints returning field missionaries to home-staff roles for which they are not qualified in order to keep them in the agency.

+ What agencies can do that facilitates collaboration

Prepare for crises. The agency has well-developed, location-specific crisis response plans that are understood by all missionaries and their sending churches. Plans include how emergency interventions such as evacuations, crisis-management teams, trauma counseling, etc., will be funded.

Practice financial clarity and integrity. The agency shares with churches and other donors an easy-to-understand summary of missionary support requirements that clarifies what major needs are funded/not funded within the standard support structure (such as children's education, vehicles, major ministry initiatives, crisis response, etc.). They consistently use funds only in line with donor designations.

Set and maintain realistic home-assignment policies. The agency has a clear policy regarding the duration and goals of home assignment and consults with the sending church if for any reason there is need to extend that time or change the focus.

Invite interaction. The agency creates opportunities for church leaders to visit their campus and interact with key staff including field supervisors, finance directors, personnel leaders, missionary-care providers, etc.

Resource churches. The agency offers various types of practical resources and personal help to assist churches in missions involvement with 21st century opportunities. Resources proffered can be agency-developed or curated resources from other sources.

— What agencies sometimes do that makes it difficult for churches to partner

Define partnership around finances. Agency personnel declare that they value church partnership but they define the church's role as largely limited to financing the agency's agenda.

Create an agency-centric focus. The agency creates an organizational culture where missionaries isolate themselves with members of their agency instead of intentionally collaborating with the larger Body of Christ to achieve Kingdom-wide goals.

Exercise rigidity in preparation requirements. The agency requires every candidate to complete all preparatory steps, rather than evaluating, on a case-by-case basis, each candidate's preparation already provided by the sending church.

Field unqualified church mobilizers. The agency assigns personnel to be liaisons with local churches who have no experience in missions leadership in the church context and/or who do not have access to the in-depth field information churches need.

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