

POSTINGS

articles for missions mobilizers



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The Special Role of a Missionary's Friend

Don't underestimate this behind-the-scenes service

Jesus delivered His Acts 1:8 commission as a priority for all of His followers. In the 21st century, His Church has more ways than ever before to strategically engage every believer in fulfilling this Jerusalem-to-the-ends-of-the-earth command. A list of Great Commission roles includes go-er, sender, welcomer, intercessor, and mobilizer. But there is at least one other overlooked and undervalued role to include—we're calling it missionary "Friend" with a capital "F."

The importance of missionary Friends is emphasized by Mark Dalton, director of missions at Shadow Mountain Community Church in El Cajon, CA. He tells missionaries that they need to base their ministry on a strong “missionary stool” with three stable legs: (1) a sending church highly engaged with them and their ministry, (2) an agency that provides accountability and care, and (3) a few close friends who actively love them, “read between the lines” to understand what’s really happening in their lives, and challenge them when needed.

A former missionary himself, Dalton understands the importance of Friends—including some at home as well as national brothers and sisters. The Friends he is describing are not mere Facebook friends or superficial relationships. Rather, these Friendships are life-giving and sturdy enough to make up that third leg of the stool that keeps it from wobbling.

Because they are deeply committed to the missionary as both a person and a worker, Friends assume the following roles as well others.

1. Friends relate to missionaries as real, normal people, not projects.

Friends don’t reach out to missionaries just to fulfill their children’s school or Bible club assignment. They don’t send an email out of pity for “the poor missionaries” or merely because someone from their small group needs to take a turn writing to them. They realize that becoming a missionary’s Friend involves a long-term commitment that lasts long after the first enthusiastic declaration that “We’ll keep in touch!”

A Friend seeks to develop an authentic Friendship based on real caring that is expressed in meaningful words and actions. This level of friendship doesn’t just occur or thrive without genuine effort—effort that stretches and blesses the Friend as well as the missionary.

2. Friends are willing to invest effort to come to understand

the missionary as a person, their family, adopted culture and context, as well as their ministry goals, successes, and failures. For example, reading books and watching movies recommended by the missionary, eating at an ethnic restaurant, and reading an online English-language newspaper published in their country are all ways to learn more about the missionary’s adopted culture. Friends don’t put missionaries on a pedestal but love and accept them as fallible human beings like everyone else—people who struggle to overcome sin and who battle discouragement when what seemed like a God-given vision fails to succeed.

3. Friends intentionally work at becoming better listeners.

Most people think they listen well, but almost everyone can significantly improve their skills as a careful listener. The library or a professional counselor can recommend a book or training program to improve listening skills. Asking good questions communicates a genuine interest if the Friend listens well to the answers. Friends avoid communicating judgment about what is shared and provide a safe place for the missionary to vent on occasion.

4. Friends learn how to communicate long distance following security protocols.

Many missionaries can use WhatsApp, Skype, or some other internet app to talk in real time, but this may require Friends to become familiar with new technology. Friends may have to persist despite frequently dropped calls, and be willing to stay up very late or get up very early to talk at a time that accommodates the time zone difference for a missionary on the other side of the world.

If the missionary lives in a high-security location, Friends must learn and consistently follow all security protocols as they communicate. Friends must also maintain boundaries in what they share with others, both because confidentiality is essential and also because others may not know or consistently practice care in how they handle security-sensitive messages.

Friends are consistent communicators. For example, it is easy for a Friend to drop off the radar over holidays when they are busy, but this may be the time when the missionary is lonely, homesick, and most needs a Friend. On the other hand, while communication should definitely be a two-way street, a Friend shouldn’t be offended if a letter or call is not answered right away. They should be patient, give grace, and just write or call again!

5. Friends make the sacrifice to visit the missionary on the field.

A Friend could plan to visit the missionary but leave the timing and length of the visit up to them. It’s unfair to automatically expect that the missionary can house Friends in their

home, or have the resources or time to be a tour guide. Instead, Friends focus their visit around what will be most refreshing and fun for the missionary, making sure to allow the missionary the pleasure of introducing their Friend to what real life is like for them. When this happens, the field visit deepens the Friendship and increases its value.

6. Friends don't rush or force a Friendship. Some missionaries are very lonely and desperately need a Friend, while others may be juggling overwhelming schedules and feel that they don't have the time to develop a new relationship. The missionary should have the right to determine if and what kind of a Friendship would be valuable and refreshing for them.

Friendship should be intentional yet natural at the same time. Relationships are best initiated before the missionary leaves for the field, allowing time to get to know one another better and determine if both parties sense good chemistry between them.

7. Friends share a common passion for ministry. Nothing makes a missionary feel isolated so much as finding that people back home are totally absorbed in living the good life and have no passion for the cause of the gospel—for which the missionary has given up home, family, career, lifestyle, etc. If the Friend is passionate about sharing the gospel in their office, reaching out to immigrant neighbors, assisting refugees to get settled, or helping to plant a new church—then the missionary will know and treasure their Friend as a kindred spirit in God's work. Many conversations will revolve around these common passions rather than more superficial topics.

8. Friends provide wise, honest counsel. A true Friend has earned the right to speak into the life of the missionary when they see them slipping into sinful habits or going in a direction that seems ill-advised. Friends must be careful not to quickly judge situations that may be highly impacted by culture, and make sure that they challenge with an attitude of humility and love. Since a Friendship is a two-way street, Friends must be open to receive wise, honest input from the missionary as well, without expecting them to be their personal counselor.

9. Friends keep their church's missions leaders informed about the missionary. If the Friend is a member of the missionary's sending church, they must clarify with the missionary what information they can share with (1) the church's leaders and (2) the congregation, and then respect these guidelines. A Friend may know far more about the missionary than anyone else in the church, giving them the privilege of helping to keep the church abreast of what is happening in the missionary's life and ministry.

There may be rare exceptions where a Friend must share confidential information with leaders if they believe those leaders have a biblical responsibility to know and respond to the circumstances. These situations are painful and must be handled with prayer and great sensitivity.

10. Friends should be Friends, not supervisors. If the Friend is a member of the missionary's sending church, it is usually unwise for them to sit on the

personnel team that makes decisions about the missionary's sending and support. The Friend should leave the accountability to someone else and just serve as a compassionate Friend.

11. Friends are dedicated intercessors. A true Friend has an extensive understanding of the missionary and this intimate knowledge enables them to be a powerful intercessor on their behalf. They should make the commitment to uphold the missionary in prayer on a consistent basis, praying not only for them but with them in person or online.

Here's just one illustration of Friend impact: J.O. Fraser, early missionary pioneer to the Lisu of Southeast Asia, gave much credit for his success to his sister back home who prayed, wrote, and supported him emotionally for decades of grueling missionary work until a church was birthed among this unreached people. Never a go-er, this woman accomplished more for missions than many who carried the title of missionary. Her role? She was a powerful Friend to her brother on the front lines.

**"Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God."
1 Samuel 23:16**

HOW CAN A CHURCH DEVELOP THEIR PEOPLE TO BE POWERFUL MISSIONARY FRIENDS?

- Use the example of David and Jonathan's friendship to help your congregation understand the power of a Friend in the life and ministry of your missionaries, especially those you send. I Sam. 23:16 says simply, "Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God." Challenge your congregation to be Jonathan-quality Friends to missionaries.
- Identify and publicly acknowledge missionary Friends in your church. From time to time, invite someone who fills this role to share with your congregation about their Friendship with a missionary. On the flip side, ask your missionaries if they have a true Friend in your church, and have them share with your congregation about the impact that Friendship has had on their life and ministry.
- As you challenge people to be goers and senders, include the role of missionary Friend. Use this article or other resources to help your people understand the opportunity. Remind them that fulfilling the role of Friend doesn't require money, foreign-language fluency, or a plane ticket. It does require sensitivity, compassion, and consistency.

- Challenge missionary appointees to make sure that they have several committed Friends before they leave for the field. With many other tasks to accomplish, building Friendships can be neglected. But a true Friend will be an invaluable asset.

HOW CAN A MISSION AGENCY ENCOURAGE LIFE-GIVING MISSIONARY FRIENDSHIPS?

- Teach appointees that their missionary-support stool needs three sturdy legs. Highlight the difference between casual friends who are likely to be connected in rather superficial ways and true Friends who will be powerful encouragers, providing both support and challenge.
- During orientation, ask a veteran missionary to describe a Friend who has played an essential role in their encouragement and perseverance. Have them share what both parties did to sustain a life-giving Friendship.
- When you speak in churches, acknowledge the importance of Friends, and express appreciation for anyone who has served in this essential role. Tell one or two stories from #2 above. Share Friendship stories on your website.

ARE FRIENDS REALLY THAT IMPORTANT FOR MISSIONARIES?

Here's a contrast that highlights their impact: Two missionaries serve in the same, challenging region of the world. One has not had a single Friend from their sending church. In almost a decade on the field, no church member has called, sent a package, or visited. The missionary feels forgotten and abandoned.

The other missionary has one very dedicated Friend in their sending congregation. They Skype regularly; the Friend has made field visits and sent care packages. Because of close communication, this missionary knows they are understood, loved, and prayed for. In each case the presence or absence of one Friend has made a huge difference.

Are the missionaries in your church supported by a stable, three-legged stool that includes dedicated, life-giving Friends? Are you a believer who plays a key role in fulfilling the Great Commission by being an intentional, committed Friend who provides support and stability to a missionary? Your role is invaluable!

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