

# POSTINGS

*articles for missions mobilizers*



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## Discontinuing Missionary Support

Making tough decisions  
for wise stewardship

Most churches can point to missionaries they support and describe with excitement their strategic ministries. These workers keep the church well informed and praying. In many cases, they regularly coordinate high-impact, short-term teams from the church and spend extended time with the congregation on home assignment.

Many churches, however, are uncomfortable as they look at their missionary roster. For some, it's just that their missionary funding is spread too thin; they support more people/ministries

than they can keep up with. Neither missionary nor church are served well if the missionary family is too large for adequate involvement or care.

But for others, deeper issues cause doubts about whether the church is wisely stewarding the missions funds of their congregation. For example, there are missionaries who don't seem to have a clear role or specific goals. Some rarely communicate. Others seem content to maintain a missionary-controlled ministry rather than empower nationals. Some serve without a clear accountability structure or are engaged in a ministry that doesn't align with the church's missions priorities.

Missions enthusiasm drops and cynicism sets in when a church funds missionaries in whom they lack confidence. Increasingly, church leaders are wanting to take proactive steps to ensure that they are fulfilling their God-given responsibility to be good stewards of the finances entrusted to them by the congregation. Because questions about how to wisely and sensitively discontinue support are coming up so frequently, *Postings* is dedicating an issue to this difficult topic.

## DEBUNKING THE MYTHS

### The myth of "forever"

In the past, missionaries generally went to one field and served there in the same ministry and with the same agency for their entire lives. Today missionaries often change ministries, shift fields, or join a different agency. Many only commit to serve a few years rather than a lifetime. They value the freedom to transition as factors in their personal lives and their ministry context change.

## Churches should not apologize for having expectations of those they support, but it is crucial to make sure that these expectations are clear to everyone.

Concurrently, churches also are changing more and more frequently. Leaders come and go, passions shift, and funding potential rises or falls. So churches too want the freedom to pursue God's priorities for each new phase of ministry. They do not believe it is wise to be locked into open-ended commitments.

This means that both church and missionary need to accept that financial support will be committed to a missionary in a specific ministry for a defined length of time—usually for two to four years, matching the worker's length of term on the field. Support commitments that are time bound emphasize the importance of regular evaluation, recalibration of vision and mission, and clear goal setting.

### The myth of "more missionaries, more interest"

Historically, missionaries solicited support from multiple churches on the theory that it increased the number of people interested in and praying for them. Today in our over-scheduled culture, this is seldom the case. A short

weekend visit once every few years and an occasional letter or email is insufficient to maintain a meaningful relationship. In addition, the extensive travel required to visit a long list of churches exhausts the missionary and their family.

Instead, churches and missionaries are recognizing that investing more support in fewer workers benefits everyone. To that end, churches are downsizing the number of missionaries on their roster and increasing the person-to-person support in order to develop more in-depth relationships and better, two-way accountability.

### The myth of "accountable only to God"

Increasingly, local churches are taking seriously both their missionary-sending function as described in Acts 13:1-3 and the reporting/accountability function illustrated in Acts 14:26-27. While God is the ultimate Missionary Sender, it is clear that the local church has a role in determining/confirming that calling and task, and in expecting the worker to report back to the church on the work to which they have been sent. Missionaries need particular accountability to their sending church, although any church (or individual) making an investment needs enough evidence to be convinced that they are wisely investing God's resources.

## DEVELOPING FUNDING PRIORITIES

### Create support categories

For many churches, it is helpful to define categories and support priorities for their missionaries and projects. Here is a sample three-tier system that is useful.

## Lay out a plan to gradually shift support.

**“Supported”** workers are usually either missionaries sent out by some other church or a national worker. They receive lower support with lower expectations.

**“Sent”** missionaries are people affirmed and commissioned by that church. They receive higher levels of support, are given better missionary care, and are resourced for their ministry in multiple ways. Sent missionaries are expected to communicate often, maintain a close relationship via their advocate team, and spend extended home-assignment time with their church.

**“Partners”** are those working in areas designated as a strategic focus of the church. These workers receive the highest levels of support and the most congregation-wide attention. They are the first priority for short-term ministries and projects because the church shares in “owning” their ministry goals. Partners may be expat missionaries or nationals. They not only fulfill the requirements of a sent missionary but also invest heavily in helping the church engage in their shared strategic focus.

Whatever your categories, it’s crucial for a church to have objective criteria for funding priorities. Here is a [matrix](#) one church developed.

### Clarify expectations and help missionaries improve

Churches should not apologize for having expectations of those they support, but it is crucial to make sure that these expectations are clear to everyone. Define the characteristics of

the missionary that you want to invest in. Often workers are confused about expectations that the church may think are obvious. Here is a [list of church values](#) you could customize and then share with those you support. Invite missionaries into a discussion if they have questions about the characteristics you value.

If the missionary is not meeting your expectations, see if you can address these areas together. For example, if your worker has a strategic ministry but struggles with communication, heighten their awareness of the importance of keeping you informed for prayer and involvement. See if there are ways that your church can help improve their communication skills or help them relate their story well. Tell the worker honestly if a lack of communication is jeopardizing your ongoing support for them.

It’s important for the missionary to know whether there is any possibility of support being continued if the issues are addressed. If so, work together on improvement goals and a timeframe. Discussion of the specific issues with the missionary’s supervisor and possibly other agency leadership is helpful in pinpointing issues and working toward solutions where such is possible. If the decision to discontinue support is firm, then both missionary and agency need to be informed.

### Explain accountability

Sometimes missionaries assume that accountability means that the church will set unrealistic standards for them to meet. Clarify that you are not holding them accountable for pre-determined results but rather expect them to set their own faith-stretching goals, stay focused on achieving them, and cooperate with their supervisor to honestly measure success in reaching them.

## Clarify for yourselves and your worker why dropping support is warranted

Churches often reduce/end support for one or more of the following reasons:

- Lack of a clear job description and/or ministry vision
- Perceived mismatch between worker’s role and their gifting
- Theological or missiological difference between missionary and church
- Change of assignment from that for which the missionary was sent or supported
- Missionary not sufficiently engaged in ministry (perhaps because of age, other priorities such as studies, visa issues, family responsibilities, etc.)
- Lack of communication with the church
- Missionary or their family is failing to thrive on the field
- Interpersonal relationship issues are defeating ministry effectiveness
- Moral failure
- Reduced funds available for the church’s missions program

## THE PROCESS OF ENDING SUPPORT WELL

### Take a longer-term approach

As a missions leadership team, you will want to define what you want your support picture to look like three to five years from now. Don’t try to make all of the changes immediately. Lay out a plan to gradually shift support to the strategic initiatives to which you feel called as a church and to those workers you are sending out from your congregation.

## Make regular, on-site evaluations

Adequately assessing missionary ministry and fit almost always requires on-the-ground visits. Unless the church has an unequivocal reason to end support, it is wise to invest the time and resources to make a field trip to personally see the viability of the work and the missionary's personal, family, and ministry situation.

## Grandfather where appropriate

If you have supported a missionary for decades, consider continuing support until retirement on the basis of a "legacy" relationship, even if the amount of support is decreased. This is a way to honor a longstanding partnership.

## Choose the right time to implement changes

If you are ending support for an overseas missionary, inform them as soon as the decision is made, but if at all possible, wait to end funding until several months after they return on their next home assignment. This provides the best opportunity for the worker to replace the lost support. If the amount of funding you provide is significant (say 10% or more of their

overall support), reducing the amount gradually over a period of two to three years is also helpful.

## Communicate personally

Share your decision to reduce or drop support either face to face or over the phone rather than in an email or letter. Be clear about the reasons. Afterward, confirm important information in writing.

## Beware of legal landmines

If you live in a litigation-prone Western context, be careful that nothing you say or write related to ending support could be construed as defamation of character. Sadly, churches and organizations have been sued over what they have communicated about the rationale for changing a missionary's status.

## Help church members understand

If the worker whose support is being decreased/ended has close ties to people in your church, take the time to meet with these people one on one to explain your decision and listen to their concerns. This may not erase their disappointment, but it will show that you appreciate their loyalty to the worker, and you can explain factors that influenced your decision as long as confidentiality is not compromised.

## Practice cultural sensitivity

If the person or ministry whose support you are dropping is a national from another culture, communicate your decision in a culturally appropriate way. Because saving face and maintaining honor are high values in many cultures, it may be best to go through a third party to relay sensitive information. Ask someone familiar with the culture for advice on how to handle the situation. Because relationships are of utmost importance in non-Western cultures, look for ways to maintain your friendship even after support stops.

## Anticipate that your missionary may take your decision personally

Despite your best efforts to make and implement your funding decision with objectivity and grace, your missionary may find it difficult to accept the news. Pray for your worker's ability to learn from the process. Pray for God's provision and direction, whether it be support replacement or a ministry change.

Does your missions leadership team need to consider discontinuing support for one or more of your missionaries? These are difficult but necessary discussions and decisions. Remember that one day you as missions leaders will give account before the Lord of the Harvest for how you managed His finances. Your team is responsible to invest your church's missions funds for the greatest possible spread of the gospel and growth of the Kingdom. Invest well!

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