

POSTINGS

articles for missions mobilizers



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You're Not the Only One

Church missions leaders use creative means to scale similar barriers

Isn't it a relief to discover you aren't the only one confronted by new circumstances? Finding a kindred spirit—even if it is in a shared difficulty—can be so comforting. Remember how God encouraged Elijah by telling him that there were 7,000 others in Israel who had not bowed their knee to Baal (1 Kings 19). While it's reassuring to know that we aren't alone in our struggles, we also want to know how others are responding.

Are you a church missions leader who feels discouraged or stressed because your global involvements seem to have downshifted or

even completely stalled right now? Is it harder in this season to find volunteers? Have changes in your church staff put many things on hold? Even though the pandemic is “over,” are various issues still distracting both your leaders and congregation from focusing on the Great Commission?

If this describes you, rest assured that you’re not the only one facing disruptive transitions. Many church leaders are grappling with obstacles created or exacerbated by our current context. Or perhaps this doesn’t represent where you find yourself right now. Instead, because your church is being blessed by accelerated growth and new

missions energy, your “obstacle” is how to keep up with it all.

Regardless of the ministry season your church is experiencing, the good news is that other congregations in similar circumstances are finding creative ways to turn obstacles into opportunities. Here are examples.

“With much transition in our congregation, we are prioritizing helping all of our people to understand and embrace our missions purpose and goals.”

With recent congregant turnover in churches sometimes reaching 25-40%, missions leadership teams are aware that they need to rebuild their congregation’s biblical understanding of God’s heart for the world as well as their grasp of the missions priorities of their church.

More important than ever is the priority of including missions information and opportunities in newcomers’ welcomes and new member classes. Clear and up-to-date missions messaging on the church website is also crucial.

Some churches are employing creative use of video such as a series of one-minute interviews of various members of their missions leadership team speaking on diverse topics. Another possibility is a series of clips featuring teens or young adults explaining why they believe missions is a biblical priority or how missions involvement has impacted their view of the world. These short videos can be played during the worship service, for the online congregation

as they wait for the service to start, and/or at the missions booth in the church atrium.

Book clubs, either virtual or in person, have become more popular, and they can be a great way to build missions understanding and vision not only in adults but children too.

“Since almost everyone in our congregation is now comfortable in online meetings, the majority of connections with our global workers happen virtually with less complicated planning.”

Most church missions leaders agree that the best result of the pandemic for their global program was the development of frequent Zoom connections with workers around the world. Surprisingly, these highly personal, more frequent virtual “visits” are helping congregants feel better connected with global workers than the usually brief, one-way presentations possible on Sunday mornings. Workers are also appreciating this more frequent contact and deeper level of connection. In addition, they report how much they appreciate and are encouraged by hearing church members pray for their needs in real time.

“Since it seems harder to recruit volunteers right now, we’re suspending work-intensive missions events in order to focus on integrating missions into existing programs.”

This decision not only takes the pressure off of a church’s missions team to plan and execute complex activities such as missions festivals and conferences, but it also redirects resources to existing programs that may need extra help right now. For example, some missions leadership teams are asking each small group in their church to do a missions study using a course like *Momentum Yes, God’s Heart for the Nations*, or *Storyline: Discovering Your Story in God’s Global Mission*. In this way, missions leaders’ energy is concentrated for the short term in helping small groups to engage well with biblical missions truths and identify ways they believe God is asking them to respond. Using a missions study in already established groups does not require adding meetings to the church calendar, and it provides a context in which to discuss involvement opportunities that can result in more people ready to step into some type of future service or leadership role in missions.

“We have lost some key members of our missions leadership team, so while we recruit and onboard new members, we have chosen to focus on just one global and one local ministry this year. For the next 12 months, all other ongoing involvements will be supported in maintenance mode; we will postpone expanding our footprint for at least a year.”

This shift may at first seem like a step backward, but less can be more. The discipline of having to whittle down commitments for the year is a valuable exercise that forces a missions team to wrestle with the question of which church involvements they believe are having the greatest Kingdom impact. Another benefit is watching to see whether members of the congregation are sufficiently committed to other outreach programs that they step up to provide leadership in roles no longer shouldered by the missions team.

“While many of our people are still hesitant to travel abroad, we’re reducing the number of short-term trips and instead are expanding individual internship opportunities, especially those here in our region that include a cross-cultural component.”

Even before COVID put short-term trips on hold, a significant number of churches were already questioning the long-term impact and cost of their short-term ministries. The pandemic lockdown provided more time to read books such as *Helping without Hurting in Short Term Missions* and *Go Light! Go Local! A Conscientious Approach to Short-Term Missions in a Global World*, books that helped leaders decide to opt for fewer, better designed trips. Meanwhile, the value of longer, personalized internships designed as potential steppingstones to some type of deeper missions involvement are often proving more effective, less work-intensive for COVID-weary field hosts, and less expensive than sending large groups.

"With so many new faces in our congregation, we've shifted our missions messaging from 'Get to know all of our missionaries' to 'Join the virtual community that focus on one of our global workers.'"

For some time, many church leaders were becoming aware that asking their people to get to know or pray for all of their missionaries was unrealistic given the overwhelming amount of information today and the speed of 21st century life. One solution that is working well for various-size churches is creating a virtual "community" around each sent worker based on common interests, phase of life, type of ministry or other connections.

A community coordinator or team (sometimes the global worker's advocate team) along with the worker themselves keeps information flowing electronically to their community group, schedules regular Zoom calls, and recruits from this group for service opportunities and home-assignment hospitality. The challenge to know and care for one missionary is perceived as "doable" by believers on information overload, yet the door is open to join multiple communities for those who so desire. Virtual communities focused on individual workers nurture relationships that are found to be stronger, deeper, and more engaged than those that develop from the typical missionary-of-the-month approach.

"I'm feeling exhausted and burned out; I will be a better leader if I take a 6- to 12-month sabbatical from my leadership role."

Like leaders in many other church roles, missions leaders often report being exhausted mentally, physically, and even spiritually. Stepping away from missions leadership responsibilities may seem like a drastic step; it takes courage for a leader to determine that in order to give God their best, they need to take some time off, and allow Him to renew and sharpen their vision, strength, and skills.

Many leaders are fearful that no one else will take their place if they take some time off, or maybe their true fear is that someone will take over and do a better job. God isn't dependent on any one person; a leader's time off can create space for growth in the rest of the missions team as well as in the leader themselves. In the long term, everyone can benefit.

Are you finding creative ways to turn obstacles into opportunities in your church's missions program? You aren't the only one dealing with ministry disruptions, but like the churches described above, you can discover that God wants to use these challenges to prepare your church for even greater global impact.

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