

POSTINGS

articles for missions mobilizers



February 2023 | Vol. 18 | Issue 2 | by Ellen Livingood

Who's Responsible to Raise Support?

A different model of missionary support teams

The sending process at Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM) revolves around the work of what they call missionary support teams or MSTs. While MSTs serve in many of the same roles as the typical Barnabas or advocate teams that churches frequently establish to care for their missionaries, EMM's model adds a support-raising responsibility that we explore in this issue of *Postings*.

To learn how MSTs function, we interviewed Barry Freed, EMM's missionary support team coach.

ELLEN: Barry, please start by explaining why you believe Missionary Support Teams (MSTs) are so important and how they function.

BARRY: We believe that workers shouldn't serve solo. Rather, they need a strong connection with their sending church, their community—and not just while they are getting ready to go. Once the workers leave for their overseas assignment, it's easy for relationships to be neglected and over time for the workers to lose contact with their senders. The purpose of the MST is to help maintain a vibrant link between the worker and the people supporting them by gifts and prayer.

Therefore, the MST serves alongside the workers while they are preparing to go, while they are on the field, and when they return for home assignment—so it's a long-term responsibility. Providing spiritual and relational/emotional support is the core of what they do. Covering the missionary and their work in prayer is also a very essential part of their task.

ELLEN: So far this sounds much like the missionary care teams that many churches have developed. However, at Eastern Mennonite Missions, your MST also has an additional component, correct?

BARRY: The MST is also responsible for financial support. Many hours of time and energy go into raising support, communicating with donors, and following up.

ELLEN: We are going to explore further the financial aspect of an MST's responsibilities, since that is unique to your model. But before we go there, let's summarize the structure and function of your MST teams.

BARRY: An MST is a group of usually four to eight people. Each person on the team has a specific

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role. Once a worker has been approved as an EMM missionary, I sit down with them and explain the MST model and challenge them to prayerfully recruit people they know with gifts that line up with the different responsibilities of the team. Here are the roles that are included:

The **team leader** brings the team together for meetings, outlines clear objectives, and distributes assignments. They oversee the team to ensure that the various responsibilities are carried out well.

The **prayer facilitator** develops the prayer support network. This person fields prayer requests from the workers and passes them on to those who have said they will pray.

The **pastoral care provider** is someone with pastoral gifting. They have a face-to-face meeting with the worker via Zoom or some other technology at least once a month to find out how they are doing. EMM also checks in on them regularly, but it's valuable to have a friend who knows them personally to help evaluate their well-being.

The **church communicator** usually comes from the sending church because they are tasked with helping the church remember and fulfill their responsibility to the worker. Out of sight can be out

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of mind for a lot of people, so the communicator and the worker confer regularly on what the church needs to hear to stay engaged. This person also reminds the congregation of the importance of cards, packages, or other personal touches.

The **newsletter manager** helps the worker keep those on their mailing list updated. They may request fresh stories, text for their newsletter, or video clips from their worker so they can develop letters, videos, or other information pieces. If the worker is a gifted communicator, this MST person's role is made easier.

And for workers with dependent children, there's a **children's advocate** on the team. This is usually a person with children of the same age, or it may be an aunt or grandparent. They provide resources to assist parents dealing with Third-Culture-Kid challenges and help with family adjustments on home assignment.

The final member I'll mention is the **financial coordinator** who is responsible throughout the worker's service to make sure the MST stays informed of pledged support totals and the current health of their support account. This information is crucial to their task of raising and maintaining the needed finances.

ELLEN: This is where we want to dig in a bit deeper because it is what sets apart your MST model from what most churches do with their Barnabas/advocate teams. How do you view

the support-raising task? You believe the MST is not responsible alone, but neither is the missionary responsible alone?

BARRY: Right. We think that the responsibility of developing support should be shared between the one who's obeying a calling to go and those who are sending them. It's a balance. Part of the church's sending responsibility is proactively working to develop the support base of prayer and finances. At the same time, there's something that happens spiritually as a worker humbles themselves to ask people to support them. It's both/and rather than either/or.

ELLEN: I can see how the both/and aspect is a huge encouragement for the missionary who knows that their MST is sharing the responsibility to see the funds provided. We hear from some potential workers, especially those from younger generations, that the requirement to raise support is a showstopper. They won't even consider going into missions because it's just too daunting to face support raising. We need to help them see support raising from a more positive, biblical perspective and recognize it as an opportunity to trust God. As you say, it builds humility and faith.

But quite honestly, it's still a big hurdle, especially for people who find public speaking or asking for money very difficult. Having to tackle alone the task of raising thousands of dollars of support can feel overwhelming.

BARRY: I tell our new mission workers that they need to "name-storm" people in their life with whom they can share their vision. At the same time, I also ask the MST members to collect names of people to whom they can endorse this worker. MSTs can do this in different ways, but often they ask the people

on their list to host a one-time cluster meeting of maybe five other couples to meet this mission worker and hear firsthand about their calling.

Or let's say a church invites a worker to share their mission calling in a service. I encourage them to take with them a member from their MST, someone who can stand up there and say, "You just heard about Bill's calling to X place. Now I want to present his need for financial support." The MST member not only does the asking but also personally endorses the worker too.

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ELLEN: It's usually so much more comfortable for someone else to make the actual ask than for the worker to request funds for themselves. And directly involving MST members is a way for more people to use their gifts in the sending process. Churches frequently have a number of people in the congregation who are employed in an "asking" profession—social media marketers, salespeople, grant writers, etc. They have a God-given gift and expertise in how to present the opportunity for support. They enjoy asking! Here's a great opportunity to engage their gifts in a way that furthers global missions.

So your model makes a lot of sense. Are there other essential elements for a successful MST?

BARRY: I encourage appointees to include people on their MST from different relationships and if possible from different churches just to expand the potential support base. If they are spread out geographically, it can be harder to function well, but with technology today, distance is not really a barrier.

However, the number one qualification for MST members is that they believe in the worker and their calling. I tell new appointees to start telling people about their call, location assignment, and plans, and then see who God stirs to join their MST. These people become enthusiastic advocates God uses to encourage others to get involved too.

ELLEN: What do you do to prepare an MST to be advocates in the support-raising process?

BARRY: Every new worker's budget is drafted in collaboration with their field supervisor, and then I forward it to the financial coordinator of their MST. We ask the MST to affirm these figures because of their role in developing the support.

Nowadays it costs a lot to support a family on the field. There have been times I've been concerned about sticker shock when I give an MST a budget that seems like a lot of money. I carefully explain all that it includes, and then hold my breath as I wait for their reaction. Generally my heart is warmed because the team says, "This is great. If these workers are going to stay a long time in the field, they're going to have to have their needs met, so all of these line items are essential."

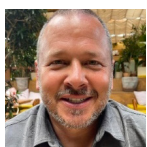
ELLEN: That's such an important step! If the team is going to advocate for churches and individuals to become supporters, they have to be able to give a clear rationale for the bottom line—why today it may cost more to live in, say, San Salvador than San Diego. There's so

much value in having a local team who can sit down with a church or potential individual donor and explain why each line item is necessary.

BARRY: I would add that each MST has a long-term financial responsibility too. They maintain ongoing contact with donors to thank them for their gifts and answer questions. If the worker's support drops while they are on the field, it is up to the MST to communicate the need to current and potential

donors. They take seriously their responsibility to see that their worker is provided for.

I tell each MST that they are every bit as important as the missionary who goes overseas. There are more people involved in a ministry than just the ones who move to the new country. Our goal for developing an MST and emphasizing community sending is to create a sense of ownership and participation that's far more powerful than just one person going off to missions on their own.



Prior to becoming the MST coach at Eastern Mennonite Missions, Barry served on two short-term mission teams and a long-term assignment in Lithuania where he taught English and aided in church development. In his free time, Barry enjoys the outdoors and reading, and he especially delights in experiencing new places and cultures.

MST AND MISSIONARY PERSPECTIVES

"My MST role is to send out receipts and thank-you notes to our workers' donors, and I am blessed by getting to know these supporters through online or phone connections. My MST service blesses me!" Carol, MST member

"Our MST took primary responsibility for our fundraising. We were involved in sharing our vision, of course, but our MST

members did the asking for support commitments. This took the pressure off of us, and reduced the worry and stress of fundraising. Now that we are on the field, if our pledged funds don't come in, our MST is committed to look for people to stand in the gap and cover the needed amount." EMM worker in Central Asia

"Our wonderful MST support team not only encourages and prays for

us but also takes a lot of work off our shoulders by connecting with our donors when we're on the field. For years, two older gentlemen regularly called and thanked our supporters on our behalf. Our MST's faithful contact with our donors is a major reason we have never had to ask for support." John, an EMM missionary in Asia

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