

POSTINGS

articles for missions mobilizers



June 2023 | Vol. 18 | Issue 6 | by Ellen Livingood

Does Your Visiting Missionary Know?

Essential information
to make their visit
most effective

When your missionary visits on home assignment, you are eager to *hear from them* what God has been doing. But are you aware that there is critical information your global worker really needs to *hear from you*?

When a missionary has been gone for two or more years, they usually experience what we call reverse culture shock because they discover that “home” is now quite different from what it was when they left for the field. The missionary’s perspective undoubtedly has also changed a lot while they were away. We may think that Zoom and Facetime keep workers abreast of changes in their sending

country, but many report that despite frequent online conversations, culture shock is actually greater now because change is happening faster than ever before.

As a missions leader, you carry significant responsibility to help global workers understand the changes in your church, especially those that impact their messaging, in order to help them design their time with you for the greatest possible impact. Below are eight topics to discuss with your missionary early in their home assignment or even before they return from the field.

1. How has your church changed since your worker last visited? Even those of us who regularly attend church every week often feel like we can't keep up with all the changes. No wonder global workers struggle to grasp the multitude of shifts they encounter when they return after years immersed in another culture! *See right, our list of potential areas of change.*

Encourage your missionary to ask questions, and don't be nonplussed if they express criticism or frustration; remember that accepting change is hard. Consciously focus your explanation to highlight the positive or at least be neutral about transitions, even if you may also be struggling with embracing all of the changes you are describing.

2. Why is platform time for visiting missionaries so limited? Many workers serve in event cultures rather than time cultures, meaning that worship services may go on for hours. Returning to a context where every aspect of the service is timed down to the minute may feel artificial, restrictive, and even disrespectful of the Holy Spirit's freedom to lead.

It may be helpful to explain how fine-tuned scheduling facilitates the work of those who must coordinate multiple services, online streaming, and other complex program elements. Most important, emphasize that today a missionary's influence flows

CHANGES TO PROCESS WITH YOUR MISSIONARY

You might also want to ask a global worker who has been back in your country for a few months to suggest some of the changes they found difficult to understand or adjust to when they first returned.

- What percentage of the congregation has begun attending since your worker was last with you? Have a number of people stopped attending?
- What changes in staff and other leadership roles have occurred?
- What are the largest and smallest age brackets represented on a typical Sunday? Has the ethnic/cultural makeup of your congregation shifted? If so, how have these changes made a difference?
- How has your church programming changed? What are you no longer doing that you did previously? Why? For example: Has the design of worship services been impacted by cell phones and online streaming? If prayer meeting has been replaced by intentional times of intercession in small groups, give the rationale. If VBS has been restructured, explain the transition. If your missionary loved the "old style" programming, such changes may seem to be a weakening of biblical focus. Explain how changes have made your church's impact greater than ever.
- How has communication changed? Are announcements now presented via screen rather than on a printed bulletin? Are missionary letters now circulated electronically rather than on paper?
- Have you changed your vocabulary, especially regarding missions? For instance, do you use the term "outreach" instead of "missions"? Or renamed the "missions committee," the "GO team"? Again, explain the why.

continued on page 3

You carry significant responsibility to help global workers understand the changes in your church, especially those that impact their messaging, in order to help them design their time with you for the greatest possible impact.

through personal relationships. Their platform time is most effective if it piques interest in later, individual dialog.

3. What do you think your people are most interested in hearing from your global worker during their “moment for missions” in the worship service? After being immersed in a totally different context for an extended time, it may be difficult for your worker to put themselves in the place of someone in your congregation and identify what will effectively connect with them. Provide some concrete examples of what grabs your congregation’s attention. Suggest that this is not a time to try to summarize years of ministry but to focus on one story of impact. You might ask a teacher or trainer from your congregation to make a short video to share with them about evolving communication styles, including an illustration or two of how they engage younger generations’ interest.

As a church missions leader, you must manage the communication context to best showcase

your worker’s ministry. An interview approach to platform time may be most effective. A couple of strategic PowerPoint slides also may help. If someone in your church is willing to use their professional graphic design skills, offer their services to help produce these, if your worker wants assistance.

4. What classes, small groups, and individuals should they visit? Unless your worker is already assigned to a Sunday school class or small group, choose two or three in advance that are a good match based on life phase, location/type of ministry, etc. Provide your worker with contact information, meeting time, and location. If your missionary is visiting during the summer while regular sessions are paused, see if there are group get-togethers they could attend. Encourage the missionary to also visit individual prayer partners. These visits will deeply encourage both intercessor and missionary.

5. How can your missionary benefit, and benefit from, their advocate team during this visit? You may call them a Barnabas team, care team, or advocate team, but regardless of the title, these are the people who have volunteered to maintain your congregation’s communication with, and care for, your missionary. If the team is functioning well, they are already aware of the worker’s plan to visit and organizing meet-ups. If not, review with your global worker the role you have designed for that team to play. Brainstorm

You must manage the communication context to best showcase your worker’s ministry.

ways the relationship can be even more beneficial to the worker, the team, and your church. Encourage your missionary to be proactive in meeting with and expanding the team, if necessary. If you or your worker are new to advocate teams, this past *Postings* provides an introduction.

6. Are there specific ways you could serve your global worker while they are with you? In advance of their visit, develop a list of possible services that your church could provide and forward it to your missionary. With their feedback, include desired services in their scheduled time with you. Review this past *Postings*, especially the *Planning Tool* for ideas.

7. Is there a difficult conversation you need to have while this global worker is with you? Talking about problems or conflicts is always handled best in face-to-face dialog. If you have concerns about your worker's ministry or personal/family life, are dissatisfied with their lack of communication from the field, or feel that other expectations have not been met, you need to broach these topics while you are together. Also, if your church anticipates potential changes in your financial support for them between now and the end of their next term, openly discuss this topic now in person. Reserve sufficient time to carefully listen to any concerns they may have too.

Confrontational conversations are never easy, but this is part of your responsibility as a leader. Talking face to face rather than communicating via email or even online allows you to use tone, facial expression, and body language to express love

and care. Be sure they know that you value them as a person and appreciate their service even if you have to bring up painful topics and work through misunderstandings.

8. How can you very intentionally celebrate your missionary and their ministry? Global workers do not want to be plaster saints put on pedestals, but they do need to hear your words of affirmation more than you know. Unfortunately, many workers approach church visits fearing that supporters will judge them for not producing enough ministry fruit or for not measuring up to some unspoken standard. Be prepared to name specific things that you appreciate about your missionaries. Express these both when they meet with your missions team and, if all possible, in front of your entire congregation.

When your missionary visits on home assignment, you certainly want to dedicate as much time as possible to listen to their story and understand the deep feelings beneath the words. So many workers return home with battle scars and need to be able to tell the painful as well as the joyful side of their story. However, in addition to listening well, make sure you take time to discuss these eight topics. Doing so will make your global workers more effective across their entire home assignment and deepen the bonds of your partnership.

Catalyst's *Postings* e-newsletter is a free, monthly publication of practical articles highlighting what churches and agencies are doing to mobilize un-tapped potential for global impact.

SUBSCRIBE at catalystservices.org/postings
READ past *Postings* articles at catalystservices.org/postings-gallery-of-archives