

POSTINGS

articles for missions mobilizers



July 2023 | Vol. 18 | Issue 7 | by Ellen Livingood

Does Our Missionary Need an Agency?

Determining if you can serve as both sending church and agency

“Why can’t we just send them ourselves?” some churches ask. “If in Acts 13 the Holy Spirit called the Antioch church to send out workers, can’t our local church do it today?”

These questions may be voiced by church leaders for many reasons. Perhaps they simply determined that they have the needed skills and resources, and believe they are up to the challenge. They may have seen a sister congregation successfully tackling the sending process on their own. Or they may be frustrated by past conflicts with an agency or feel that an agency has seriously failed their workers. In yet other situations, it’s a new missionary who wants to avoid what they feel are too many hoops

to jump through or a veteran worker who believes their agency is just an unnecessary expense or even a hindrance to their work.

Regardless of the reason, churches may find themselves asking, “Does our global worker *really* need an agency, or can we send them well

ourselves?” This month’s *Postings* is designed to help you consider the many aspects of this question. Your answer could have a significant positive or negative impact on your worker’s ministry success as well as their personal and family wellbeing.

Are you prepared to absorb these tasks at the level necessary to ensure the well-being of the ministry and all those involved?

DOES OUR MISSIONARY NEED AN AGENCY?

	PROBABLY NEEDS AN AGENCY	POSSIBLY CAN BE SOLELY CHURCH SENT
1.	First Term. The sending church and their new appointee have no reliable track record to determine how much guidance will be needed as the worker lives and works in a challenging cross-cultural environment. Nor can they or their church accurately predict the capacity of their family to handle the challenges without the support of an agency structure.	Veteran. An experienced missionary is better able to evaluate their own and their family’s emotional and ministry needs. If they have developed healthy, collaborative relationships with a field team or network of national and/or expat colleagues in the area, they may not need the agency structure.
2.	Gifted requires a team for the greatest impact. A worker in, or headed to, an isolated ministry area may have gifts that depend on a specific team configuration best provided by an agency. Example: A missionary gifted in evangelism needs a colleague with the gift of discipleship.	A strong, field-based organization that fulfills vital functions. If a worker is serving with an on-the-ground entity such as a church, school, or NGO that provides complementary ministry gifts as well as good structure, support, and accountability, their agency dependency is minimized.
3.	Unstable context. If the worker serves in a region with limited health care, unstable government, heightened potential for natural disasters, and/or strong government or community opposition to their ministry, their need for agency support systems is high. A large part of our world fits this unstable description.	Stable context. If the worker serves in a stable location with a relatively low likelihood of needing evacuation or crisis intervention for adequate health care, a security crisis, or a natural disaster, their agency-dependency lessens. However, should a crisis arise, the sending church must be willing and prepared to take immediate action that could involve extensive cost and require expertise in negotiation, trauma counseling, etc.
4.	Limited missionary care resources. The sending church lacks experience and resources to provide the specialized spiritual, emotional, and mental care a cross-cultural worker and their family will likely need.	Well-vetted plans in place for missionary care. An independent worker’s situation is more viable if the sending church has trained personnel and sufficient finances to provide in-depth, on-field and home-assignment care.

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5.	History of conflict. If the worker's rationale for ending their previous agency relationship is based on multiple personal clashes with team members or agency leaders, there may be future conflicts where an agency/church partnership is needed.	History of compatibility. If the worker would be leaving their current agency on excellent terms and has a history of working well with colleagues across cultural and ethnic lines, the church can be more comfortable about the possibility of sending solo.
6.	Ministry mismatch. If the worker's assignment no longer fits within the purposes of their agency, there may be legitimate reasons to leave their current organization. In such cases, joining a more suitable organization may be the best alternative.	Ministry fitting under national leadership. Western workers sometimes pursue avenues of service directly under the leadership of national entities (schools, hospitals, businesses, NGOs, etc.) which have the capacity to fulfill many agency-type functions.
7.	Decision driven by financial pressures, not the needs of worker and ministry. Sometimes missionaries want to avoid or end agency membership in order to reduce their support requirements by eliminating administrative fees. The need for, and value of, professional services and field collaboration must be the priority in this important decision, not merely cost.	Ability of sending church to help the worker reach their full potential. The sending church has sufficient personnel to support and supervise field workers. They are prepared to invest time to understand complex field situations and take a proactive role in making decisions for the long-term benefit of workers and ministry.
8.	Lack of experience in support services. The church lacks the qualifications to assume responsibility for receiving and dispersing donations according to the requirements of multiple government entities, and for handling complex HR matters such as health insurance, pension benefits, etc.	Church resources sufficient to fund and staff complex sending functions. The church has fully researched what will be required and is willing to assume responsibility for complex international financial, legal, and personnel matters. The church understands the financial ramifications of these responsibilities.

How will you demonstrate that you can provide the needed financial management, missionary care, and ministry supervision?

BEFORE YOUR CHURCH DECIDES TO SEND ALONE

Do you really understand the breadth of responsibilities? If your church is considering taking on full sending responsibilities in place of an agency, make sure that you are well aware of what is involved. Visit the headquarters of a well-established agency and find out what services their various departments deliver. Are you prepared to absorb these tasks at the level necessary to ensure the wellbeing of the ministry and all those involved?

Are you sure you have a clear picture of the situation? If your global worker wants to leave their agency because of conflict, make sure that you do all you can to get the full picture, not just assume the missionary's perspective accurately represents the entire reality. This means not only talking in depth with leaders on the field as well as key people in the agency's home office, but also pursuing conversations with respected personnel

on the field who are not members of the same agency and can therefore provide a more objective viewpoint.

Consider the entire family. Before you make a decision about sending without an agency framework, think about the ramifications for the spouse and children. In some situations, one spouse has a supportive work environment and doesn't feel the need to be part of an expat team or agency network. However, the rest of the family may be more isolated and prone to struggling with cultural adaptations, school choice issues, and other concerns. Take into consideration the impact on the entire family when cutting agency ties or deciding to forego them.

Are you ready to remunerate for field services? It is a common field scenario: A new missionary who arrives on the field sent out solely by their church quickly realizes that they need help from someone who knows the local context. They ask a veteran, agency-connected worker for help—requiring literally days of their time to negotiate with government authorities, find housing, help research schooling choices for the children, buy a car, etc.

Often these “solo” workers become unofficial members of an established team, relying heavily on the support of the team leader and colleagues. Veteran workers are usually happy to be helpful. However, this usually involves out-of-pocket costs for them as well as the time required to provide their valuable expertise. Churches placing new workers in such a situation need to remunerate those who, in essence, serve as surrogate agency staff on their behalf.

Would a different agency be better than no agency? For a number of reasons, a global worker may no longer be a good match with their

agency. But this does not automatically mean they should serve without an agency. Many other factors may indicate that a change of agency, not an elimination of any agency relationship, might be best.

What about those impacted by a church's decision to send solo? Perhaps your church is a supporting, not the sending, church for a worker who is not going to join, or not continuing to serve with, an agency. You will need to be convinced that the needed support systems are in place. Have the factors described in this article been carefully and prayerfully considered?

If you are the sending church and your global worker has other donors, especially other church supporters, you will want to make sure that they are willing to continue support if there is no agency involved. How will you demonstrate that you can provide the needed financial management, missionary care, and ministry supervision?

What will be the impact on your church? One large church decided to serve as sending agency for several of their workers. Their missions pastor, a returned missionary with extensive field experience and administrative skills, capably coordinated many agency-like services. While the arrangement served their missionaries well, the missions pastor noted that these responsibilities were draining time he needed to invest in leading the overall missions effort at the church. Consider whether you have personnel resources to serve both missionary and church needs well.

Can you guarantee continuity? Unfortunately, there are sad stories of churches that have undertaken to send their worker without an agency and then a crisis has rendered the church incapable of, or unwilling to, continue in that

role, stranding their worker on the field. Consider very seriously what would happen if your church split, suddenly lost your senior pastor, or decided that you are no longer able to fulfill the extensive responsibilities of sending. Don't assume that it can't happen to your church. If you decide to send solo, make sure that you have financial reserves and a back-up administrative plan to minimize the disruption a church crisis would cause for your global workers.

Should you consider a hybrid model of sending? Some churches are finding a good solution by partnering with an agency that is based on a church-centered sending model. These are not just pass-through accounting services but experienced missions organizations that intentionally rely heavily on the sending church to provide significant support in multiple areas but which also offer many services and field expertise as needed. Two of these are **Shepherd's Staff** and **Upstream Sending**.

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So, can your church send well without an agency?

One mission pastor found himself alone on an emergency flight heading to the other side of the globe to make decisions with his church's missionaries who had just suffered a traumatic assault. "What am I doing here?" he remembers thinking to himself. "I don't have the wisdom or expertise to step into this situation." It was too late then to recognize the value an agency would have brought to dealing with this complex set of circumstances.

Other churches serving as both church and agency testify that their workers are thriving, partially because they are unencumbered by requirements needed in an agency that includes hundreds of workers. Because there is no agency middleman, the missionaries feel more connected to their church back home.

What's right for you and your workers? As you can see, the issues are complex, and the expectations and challenges may be greater than you initially anticipate. Before you decide to go it alone, get advice from other churches that have gone this route. Ask experienced missionaries serving with an agency as well as those who have been sent solely by their church for their perspective on what makes church-sending work or not work.

Regardless of your choice, your missionaries will need your encouragement, support, and counsel as they invest their lives in the hardest yet most worthwhile undertaking they and you can imagine.

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