

POSTINGS

articles for missions mobilizers



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Should Your Missions Pipeline Run Uphill?

Taking time to send workers well prepared

God mandates that the local church be the primary agent in sending workers into ministry, both locally and globally, whether for a day or a lifetime.

This means that the local church's responsibility is to send the RIGHT people at the RIGHT time with the RIGHT equipping to the RIGHT place to do the RIGHT job with the RIGHT team.

Of course, the longer and more challenging the assignment, the greater the responsibility to make sure that all of these "right" pieces are in place.

This issue of *Postings* will address the challenging decisions churches must make as they seek to

fulfill their sending role well, especially with those anticipating a longer-term, global assignment.

THE CHURCH'S MISSIONS PIPELINE

Churches often describe their missionary-sending process as a pipeline. This metaphor accurately indicates that the sending congregation should develop for prospective workers a guided experience that will eventually deliver them well prepared and ready for the assignment they will fulfill on the other end. However, in a desire to see more workers launched into the harvest, churches can be tempted to skip over essential assessment and preparation steps, resulting either in the wrong people being sent or the right people going too soon and insufficiently equipped.

Important differences distinguish this generation of missions volunteers from earlier ones. While there are many amazing young adults stepping forward for service, some troubling characteristics mark a growing number of those considering missions today. Much has been written about the emotional fragility of younger adults, and sobering statistics indicate an onslaught of mental health issues. Many prospective missionaries come with the baggage of family dysfunction, and a rising tide of applicants have a history of pornography or drug/alcohol abuse. There is growing alarm that many younger Christians are “biblically illiterate.” As church attendance and loyalty have waned, a concerning number approach missions without in-depth experience in a local church, much less having proven their ability to lead in ministry when things get tough.

These disturbing trends, and others, are not overcome overnight. Rather, they require extended time in a discipling and mentoring context. The local church is far better positioned

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than the mission agency or Christian educational institution to carry out this deep character and competence development. However, it requires the intentionality of a well-defined pipeline process and a determination not to allow the preparation to be short circuited.

Each of the following scenarios describes a situation where church missions leaders felt pressured to make the missionary-sending process as easy as possible and to push people through their sending pipeline quickly. An “uphill pipeline principle” follows each one.

1. Sending Without Relationship

A young woman who grew up in our church has been away at university and graduate school for the past six years. She has just written to inform us that she is joining the global staff of a campus ministry that she was a part of during her college years. Because she has the enthusiastic endorsement of her local campus leaders, she assumes that we will automatically approve and generously support her. Although we know her family, none of the members of our leadership team

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or church staff knows this woman as an adult or has personally observed her character or gifting.

Uphill pipeline principle: Commissioning and sending new workers requires the sending church to know them and know their character, calling, and competence.

Church leaders rightly rejoice when they hear that their college-age youth are involved in a campus ministry. However, if the college ministry becomes their sole spiritual home, the sending church becomes merely a funding source. Requiring the applicant to spend extended time back in their church to demonstrate competence and calling and to build relationships is essential but often met with resistance. However, without a mutual commitment to the important role of the local church, a true partnership is impossible.

2. Sending Hastily Due to Circumstances

Our prospective worker is determined to get to the field quickly and has already informed the school where he currently teaches that he is not coming back next year. We are concerned that he needs more time and

mentoring to mature and also to gain some cross-cultural experience here. But because his salary will end, he insists he must bypass our preparation process and leave soon.

Uphill pipeline principle: Circumstances do not justify failure to adequately prepare potential missionaries.

As in this case, the motivation for pushing a candidate through the pipeline too quickly is often created by a rash decision they make without consulting their sending church. Don't bend to the pressure or an important lesson will be short circuited. Instead, recognize this as an opportunity for the individual's spiritual development. Every prospective worker needs to learn how to discern God's leading in partnership with their church, and church leaders must resist succumbing to the pressure of circumstances.

3. Sending Without Proven Readiness

The son of one of our elders has battled an alcohol addiction, but a few months ago he recommitted his life to Christ and seems to have been miraculously delivered. Now he is passionate about sharing the gospel, and his family and our entire church are thrilled with his transformation. He has just told our missions leadership team that he wants to join an organization we had never heard of for a two-year evangelistic mission to an unreached people. While we love his passion, we have concerns about his readiness and about the organization. However, we know that the majority of our church body will be fully behind him. In fact, our missions leadership team is split on what to do.

Uphill pipeline principle: Passion does not trump the need to adequately prepare potential missionaries, even if church members are eager to push ahead with sending.

It's a joy to see someone on fire for God and eager to serve Him. However, missions service is tough and spiritual warfare is real. Enthusiasm can quickly wane in a challenging cross-cultural context, and those with untested spiritual fervor often fall prey to discouragement and disillusionment. Preparation that requires perseverance through difficulties is well worth some delay. It's also essential that the church be confident that they can partner well with the agency. If such confidence is lacking even after doing due diligence to get to know the agency, the church needs to point the candidate to a better match.

4. Sending Because of the Agency's Urgency

Our missions leadership team has begun walking alongside a couple from our church whom we believe God has tapped for service. They are fairly new believers, and we aren't yet sure of their ministry gifting. This couple already identified an agency they would like to join. We believed we could work well with this particular agency, so we approved their attending an initial assessment there. The couple returned from this assessment session telling us that agency leaders believe they are the perfect fit for a very strategic role that desperately needs to be filled. They want to appoint them immediately and see them on the field in a few months. We feel blindsided and don't believe this considers what is best for these potential workers.

Uphill pipeline principle: Neither ministry need nor agency pressure should override the church's commitment to investing adequate time preparing future workers.

There will always be desperate needs and unfilled roles that seem urgent. Yet over and over, churches and ministries have learned the hard way that sending an immature, unprepared worker to fill a pressing need disrespects the individual and how God wants to develop them for lifelong impact. Too often, these unprepared workers come home defeated, their field colleagues have been distracted from their ministry to try to shore them up, and the work they were so urgently sent to accomplish suffers. Slowing down the sending process to make sure workers are well prepared will accomplish far more long term.

5. Sending Without Addressing a History of Concerns

Our church sent a couple overseas for a one-year assignment. They have just returned home and tell us that they are going back with another organization and are expecting our support to continue. However, we know that they have had troubling personal conflicts with their team this past year.

Uphill pipeline principle: Workers' manipulation of circumstances to avoid dealing with past conflicts is not a reason for a church to endorse their plans.

An internship or short-term assignment is a great way to prove both character and competence. If issues surface during this period, it's important to take the time to more carefully analyze readiness and address issues before

commissioning them for longer-term service. Almost anyone who wants to serve overseas can find some organization willing to send them, regardless of lack of preparedness, indications of character issues, or other concerns about their fit and/or readiness for ministry. Churches are responsible before God not to send workers they are not confident are called to and/or fitted at that time for service.

"One of your most important responsibilities is to keep the wrong people from going to the field." —George Murray, former Executive Director, TEAM

OTHER PIPELINE PRINCIPLES

- **Keep the wrong people home.** George Murray, former executive director of TEAM, challenges churches, "One of your most important responsibilities is to keep the wrong people from going to the field." When necessary, your leaders must be willing to say no or wait, even if they know that their answer will result in pushback from the candidate, the congregation, or other leaders who may think that when someone feels called it automatically means they should be sent. Help your team to know that this may be painful, but saying no/wait is a critical part of their role.
- **Proactively disciple.** A church that is committed to sending qualified workers needs to be serious about discipling them well and providing leadership opportunities where they can confirm their gifting and develop resilience. Internships and training programs are a great place to do this. Valuable internships can be pursued either inside the church or with organizations such as **Launch Global**, **International Project**, and **Café 1040**. Many denominations and other organizations have their own in-depth internships that focus on developing future workers. Mentors in your church could use books such as *Mission Smart* by David Frazier or *Spiritual Equipping for Mission* by Ryan Shaw as study guides while remembering that discipleship is learned life-on-life, not from a book.
- **Define the process.** Your church's steps to missions service should be summarized in writing, creating a uniform standard and avoiding ambiguity. Some guidelines and samples of clear steps to being sent by your church can be found [here](#).
- **Look for their response.** Observing how potential workers respond to delays and requirements for additional preparation speaks volumes about how they are likely to respond to the inevitable difficulties placed on their path once they begin cross-cultural ministry. How they accept delay or redirection is as important as the process.
- **Provide encouragement.** Prospective workers you slow down on their missions journey will need your encouragement. Make sure they understand that you are committed to their best interest and greatest lifelong impact. Clarify how you will walk alongside them to find a better fit for their gifts or to become more adequately prepared for the many challenges of missionary life and work. Stay in close contact to provide shepherding through their disappointment and ongoing development.

- **Tap a resource.** David and Lorene Wilson's book, *Pipeline: Engaging the church in missionary mobilization*, can help you develop a well-designed sending process.

THE RESULTS OF REQUIRING SUFFICIENT PREPARATION

Recently a church leader described two situations in which they identified yellow flags that convinced them the applicants were not ready to be sent. In the first case, the couple refused to accept the answer they were given, left the church, and persuaded another congregation to send them. They didn't last on the field.

Dialog with the second couple raised concerns about their readiness, and they were asked to slow down their process and complete some additional preparation. The couple disagreed and walked away from the sending process. Eventually they purchased a home and decided not to pursue ministry overseas.

Such experiences confirmed to the leaders of this church that they were correct in resisting the pressure to facilitate the going process too quickly.

In another church context, a different response from the candidates produced a very different result:

Don was a medical doctor in his late 30s when he and his wife began considering missions and entered their church's missionary preparation program. Many churches would have quickly

commissioned these mature believers and sent them off to the field. But their preparation process took three years, and looking back now after fruitful years of service in southeast Asia, they can see multiple benefits of this extended preparation.

First, it gave them time to sense God's confirmation of their call and have their church leaders confirm it too. Second, when they entered the preparation process, they thought they knew which agency they would join. However, as they completed the church's requirement to research three agency options, they realized another one would be a better match. Third, it gave them time to prepare themselves, their children, and their extended family. Don's mother was initially opposed to their becoming missionaries but by the time they were ready to leave for the field, she was onboard and eagerly praying for their new ministry. Don summarizes, "If we had rushed the process, we would have lost valuable lessons that have helped us stay long term."

All of missionary life and service is an uphill climb. We do a disservice to both the future worker and our church community if we create a sending process that is too easy. Christ Himself reminds us that "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Mk. 8:34 ESV) Our missionary sending process must reflect this high but solemn calling.

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