

POSTINGS

articles for missions mobilizers



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Honest Conversations

Part 1 of a 2-part series
addressing hidden
missionary concerns

In 2024, **Global Trellis** asked their missionary subscribers: Is there one or more issues that might jeopardize your continuing in service if your supporters, organization, or sending fellowships knew about it? If so, what is it?

This was not a formal survey with a broadly representative survey group. However, as the anonymous responses poured in, Global Trellis leaders realized that they had touched a nerve, and they subsequently produced a summary white paper as well as a PowerPoint presentation geared specifically for senders, both available **online**. We want to express

our gratitude to Amy Young and her team for this work and for sharing it with the broader Christian community.

To understand what we are presenting in this and next month's *Postings*, you need to take time to read at least their summary article, *Let's Talk about It*, including the numerous quotes from missionary respondents.

Understanding the points made below hinges on your first reviewing the survey feedback.

While you may initially be shocked by these responses, those who counsel cross-cultural workers know that these 225 comments represent the reality of often-hidden missionary struggles. Is your first reaction, "That doesn't represent our missionaries!"? Sadly, it almost certainly *does* represent some of them; likely many of your missions family struggle to some degree with more than one of these issues.

The comments reveal at least two levels of concern. The most sobering is the fact that so many missionaries are wrestling with

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such deep problems. Each issue cries out for compassionate, individual attention from the church, agency, and in some cases professional counselors.

But alongside these gut-wrenching problems is the painful truth that many missionaries feel they can't reveal these issues to their agency and/or church. Either trust has never been built, or somewhere along the line it has been lost. Biblical care for those sent into missions requires the church to invest the time and energy to overcome geographic distance and walk alongside their workers as together they seek solutions to difficult, complex problems. However, before a specific issue can be addressed, trust must be built or rebuilt between missionary and church (and often agency too) so that transparency is "safe."

Global Trellis attributes much of the communication breakdown to the "missionary pedestal"

syndrome in the church. While this is certainly one significant factor, there are other barriers too. This two-part article can only begin to scratch the surface of this important discussion.

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HOW CAN WE DISMANTLE THE MISSIONARY PEDESTAL?

Some churches do treat missionaries as extraordinary saints who live blissfully above all difficulties, and if parents, are raising perfect children. Such expectations, real or perceived, may cause workers to feel they must live up to some heroic

missionary image. Not mentioned in the survey, but on the opposite end of the spectrum are the people in churches who believe missionaries go overseas because they can't make it in their own country. Both perspectives are damaging.

Church leaders. Emphasize to your congregation that your missionary is neither a superhero or a failure. Design small group interactions in which your worker can relate to your congregation as a “real person.” Encourage them to be honest about their weaknesses and mistakes in a way that helps your people understand that they struggle with many of the same fears and disappointments that all Christians face, and others that are unique to cross-cultural life.

Verbalize often to your worker that you want them to feel safe to be even more open about their difficulties with your missions leadership team. Can you have an open discussion about why they may perceive that being transparent with you is too much of a risk? What will make you a group with whom they can be honest?

Missionaries. A worker can perpetuate the image of the “saintly missionary” by how they present themselves and their ministry in emails, videos, and in person. Are you willing to be transparent and describe failures or mistakes you have made or times when you did not act in love toward colleagues or locals? Your vulnerability will help your church see you as a real person.

Probing a little deeper, do you actually feel more spiritual than the average Christian? It's easy to subconsciously nurture a superiority attitude.

What hides behind the missionary pedestal?



Grit to Stay, Grace to Go by Sue Eenigenburg and Eva Burkholder is written primarily for missionaries.

However, it also allows church missions leaders to better understand some of the pressures and discouragements that global workers often feel they can't talk about because of the missionary pedestal syndrome. Having “grit to stay” doesn't eliminate depression, theological doubts, family conflicts, or counterproductive ways of coping with the stresses of missionary life.

This book will help your missions leadership team begin the process of becoming better prepared to help workers progress toward healthier lives and ministries.

DOESN'T THEIR AGENCY DEAL WITH THESE ISSUES?

Many churches assume that it's the job of the mission agency to deal with complicated and painful issues. The reality is that often that doesn't happen or is inadequate. Possibly the missionary has hidden the issue from their agency leaders. Sometimes the agency is the problem, at least in the eyes of the missionary. Or in other cases, the leaders just don't feel competent or have time to deal

with the issue and therefore sidestep addressing it.

Throughout their service, a missionary remains a part of their sending church which carries responsibility for pastoral care. Ideally, the church's care should be coordinated with care from the agency, but the pastoral care of missionaries should not—really cannot—be totally delegated to the agency.

Church leaders. How are you pastoring the missionaries you have sent? Are you asking the hard questions about their marriage/singleness, their relationships with colleagues, issues their children struggle with, the amount of time they spend on computer games or social media, their use of porn, their finances, etc. As you are sensitive to the Holy Spirit, with compassion and humility you can raise issues that He guides you to probe. With couples, talk to husband and wife separately and together. Also spend time with older kids to just listen to their perspective.

Consider how effectively you could support your worker dealing with an emergency situation—such as a robbery, political coup, mental-health crisis, or other traumatic event. If needed, could you quickly mobilize a couple of well-prepared people to travel onsite to care for them? Waiting until a crisis happens to prepare is too late!

Missionaries. *Tender Care: The heart and soul of caring for God's scattered servants* would be a great book to give your sending church's missions team. You could also share this article with them. Help them understand what support your agency does or doesn't provide, and where and how you need your church to be present and involved. Don't be afraid to ask them to proactively fill their role as your church and to be your pastor/shepherd no matter where you are.

No one took responsibility.

The missionaries were colleagues working in the same city but not under the same agency. Aggressive government opposition to the gospel created constant pressure. Over time, it became painfully obvious that one worker was not coping with the stresses. Among other things, he wouldn't leave his house for extended periods of time, forcing his wife and coworkers to cover his responsibilities. His wife didn't view going home to get help as a viable option, partially because family members had key leadership roles in their home church.

Deeply concerned, their missionary colleagues contacted their agency, which they found had assessed them at a single meal with "seem a little lonely." Desperate, the colleagues reached out to the local church, but the leaders felt they lacked authority to intervene. There was no evidence that he received real help from anyone.

SHOULD OUR CHURCH INTERVENE?

Most churches and agencies would affirm that there are situations in which, for the sake of the missionary, their family, colleagues, and ministry, some type of major intervention is needed.

Depending on the worker's location, there may be an option for time away within their country or region of service to address issues with competent counselors. But in many cases, bringing them home temporarily or permanently to address the problems is the only way to work through the issues and the almost-certain impact that they have had on family, ministry, colleagues, etc.

However, missionaries often want to hide or downplay their problems fearing that revealing their struggles will result in decisions that will interrupt or even end their ministry. Yet so often, ignoring or burying difficulties escalates the problems. Moral issues, marriage/family dysfunction, acute mental or physical health concerns, major burnout, significant theological differences, unresolved personal conflicts, a ministry or giftings

mismatch, and other serious issues can reach the severity where removal from the field is in everyone's best interest.

You may ask, "Is it our church's place to get involved in addressing these issues?" In general, each missionary should have one sending church to whom they are accountable.

The leaders of that congregation along with the worker's agency, if there is one, make the decision after honest discussions with the worker, and their spouse if they are married. In some cases, they may feel compelled to make a decision without the worker's agreement. Other supporting churches should be able to entrust the decision-making responsibility to the sending church and the agency.

However, sometimes workers either do not have a sending church or the sending church may not be willing to be involved with complex problems. In such cases, a supporting church may need to decide whether they are comfortable with the agency's unilateral decision or if they will feel constrained to take some course of action on their own.

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Church leaders. Much compassion, prayer, discussion, and open communication—ideally involving the sending church, agency, and missionary together—should go into determining the best course of action and the timing of any needed intervention. For some helpful guidelines, download the [extensive examination of transition decisions and responsibilities](#) compiled several years ago by a team representing both church and agency.

Confirm with your missionaries your wholehearted commitment to see them and their ministry flourish. Explain that that could even require bringing them home if you believe it is in their best interest. If you are serious about this commitment, you will need to have a contingency fund that could cover, or at least help to cover, the cost of bringing workers home, obtaining short-term housing, and covering the cost of counseling or even a residential program, if deemed necessary. Your missionaries are worth it!

Missionaries. Help your sending church understand some of the complexity of being accountable to several entities—church, agency, and perhaps indigenous leaders where you serve. Work with your church leaders to clarify what accountability they want from you, being as specific as possible. Be honest about what makes reporting affirming and joyful for you vs. time-consuming and discouraging.

Explain how leadership changes in your sending church make it difficult for you to maintain a sense of belonging and trust. How can you work together to develop and maintain the kind of transparent relationship that encourages mutual honesty and vulnerability that can survive leadership changes and geographic distance? Are you willing to take some risks to be more transparent? Can you be very specific about what you need the church to do? Would it be helpful to have a facilitator for such discussions, perhaps a former or retired missionary?

Is it sometimes right to “disrupt” ministry?

The new missionary family was working on language learning which was proving especially difficult for the husband. Eventually his leaders became aware that serious alcohol abuse had become his way of escaping a deep sense of failure. Requiring them to come home to get help meant another transition and disruption for the young family, but it was deemed the best alternative.

With in-depth counseling and repentance, healing took place. Rather than return to their previous field, the couple recognized their gifts better fit a totally different type of ministry in their homeland where they served effectively.

Honestly, it was very painful for us to read through the workers' statements in the *Let's Talk about It* document. We know it was for you too. Cross-cultural work is hard enough without carrying the kinds of personal pain that were poured out by almost half of those who responded to the survey.

"Carry one another's burdens," Paul admonishes in Galatians 6:2. Sharing the burden-carrying is never more appropriate and needed than in the case of workers your church has commissioned to go as your representatives to the ends of the earth.

Part 2 of this article addresses:

- You've changed so much!
- Who really needs to know?
- We'll be fine!
- Do you really care about me?

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