

POSTINGS

articles for missions mobilizers



July 2025 | Vol. 20 | Issue 7 | by Ellen Livingood

Honest Conversations

The second of a 2-part series addressing hidden missionary concerns

Last month in part 1 of this series, we introduced the **Global Trellis survey** that asked their missionary constituency: Is there one or more issues that you believe might jeopardize your continuing in service if your supporters, organization, or sending fellowships knew about it? If so, what is it?

To understand what we are presenting here, we urge you to take time to first read their document including the numerous quotes from missionary respondents.

Part 1 of our series addressed: How can we dismantle the missionary pedestal? Doesn't their agency deal with these issues? and Should our church intervene? We would encourage you to read that issue of *Postings* before jumping into this concluding article.

"YOU'VE CHANGED SO MUCH!"

Living in a new culture always changes missionaries. Don't be surprised if your workers rethink even the most foundational elements of their faith, self-image, political views, family lifestyle, etc. Additionally, factors like the pressure of 24/7 immersion in a new culture, isolation, and constant security concerns can nurture temptations and ungodly responses. This can come as a surprise to the worker as they may have never experienced these issues in their homeland or thought they were long ago resolved—things like marital conflicts, alcohol addiction, porn use, depression, volatile anger, and many others.

Ideally team leaders and agency caregivers process these changes and issues with workers in real time and in debriefing sessions at the end of each term. Whether or not this occurred and was sufficiently in depth, your missionary also needs to be able to discuss these shifts with the leaders of the church that sent them out and still holds responsibility to shepherd them.

Frank discussions may surface opinions that no longer reflect the perspective of many people in your church but have grown out of the worker's personal experiences in a global setting radically different from your local context. As leaders, it is essential that you can separate core doctrinal beliefs from positions on which Christians can differ. One of the greatest gifts your missionary may give you is a better understanding of the breadth of the global church and the opportunity for unity on essentials but freedom on secondary issues.

The missionary isn't the only one who has changed! The sending church almost certainly has been changing quickly too. The worker may have looked forward to home assignment so they can relax in a familiar and comfortable church context, only to find that their sending body now seems unfamiliar. New faces are in leadership roles. Beloved programs may have been eliminated, and the congregation may seem less interested in missions. Sometimes a global worker has as much difficulty accepting the ways their church has changed as the

She waited 10+ years.

As a single woman missionary was leaving for Africa, her pastor promised to visit her. Once in Africa, she heard nothing. Her father wrote that the church was praying for her, but she had no communication from the church leaders or congregation. It was over a decade later that a team finally visited.

"After that trip, so many things improved," she says. "They knew me in a new way; they prayed for me in a new way."

After a difficult closure of her time in Africa, the church helped her get professional debriefing and choose a new ministry on a new continent. Now immersed in a very demanding ministry while learning a new language and culture, she again longs for a visit from her church. They haven't yet come. She's trusting it won't take a decade this time.

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church has accepting the changes in the worker. Left unaddressed, changes often erode trust.

Church leaders. By far the most effective way to come to understand your missionary and their shifted perspectives is to visit them on the field. Go first to learn rather than to have some type of ministry because that's what your worker wants most of all.

Visiting will help you grasp something of the blessings and challenges of their context. At the same time it demonstrates in a profound way that you care and want to understand them.

To help your missionaries feel connected and stay current with changes at your church, at least once a year, invite all of your workers to an online session with your missions leadership team. Introduce any new members of your team, describe the major changes in your church with some rationale, and answer questions.

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Missionaries. While it may seem unfair, the responsibility for helping your church to understand your shifting perspectives is largely up to you. Encourage your sending church to send your pastor or another key leader whom you perceive to be culturally sensitive and a good listener/learner to make a field visit. Don't hesitate to personally request that specific leaders visit

you. Be candid about why it is needed and a good investment of their time and funds.

WHO REALLY NEEDS TO KNOW?

Missionaries' reticence to disclose "risky" personal information is often tied, at least in part, to the question of who has the right to know and how confidentially the information will be treated. The missions agency may also resist sharing information. This is another aspect of transparency that needs to be discussed at the outset of the sending process.

Church leaders

- What does your church need to know? The worker's agency may refuse to share sensitive information with your church for various reasons. For one, confidentiality can become a legal matter if a disgruntled missionary chooses to sue for defamation of character because of what was shared.

At the same time, your church may feel you need information about any issue that would jeopardize the worker's ability to fulfill their ministry in a worthy manner. Are there certain issues you expect to be informed of and have a role in addressing? If so, before sending your worker with them, have a very honest discussion with the potential mission agency about which issues you place in that category and how any concerns will be handled. A written agreement may be wise.

- What needs to be reported? If your church is handling a serious moral issue related to your worker, it is essential that you understand reporting requirements. Certain moral infractions must be reported to government

authorities and failure to do so can carry severe consequences.

- Who in your church *really* needs to know? Missionaries have been deeply wounded when sensitive information has been made more public than it needs to be. Limit the sharing of information to those who truly need to be informed. Confidentiality is essential for a relationship of trust.
- What financial information does your church have the right to ask for? Since many churches make missionary support decisions based on need, they require missionaries to provide personal financial information including sources of income beyond their missionary support. Income from things like a part-time job outside of their missions work, income from rental property, or some form of government subsidy can then impact the church's support decisions. Since most employees, including those in Christian organizations, are free to earn outside income that doesn't reduce their salary, this is a complex issue. Workers may view asking for this information as an invasion of privacy and feel that reducing support because of it is unfair. There are no easy answers to this dilemma, but acknowledging the tension may help.

Missionaries. Complicated and painful issues arise at a time when you likely are already feeling vulnerable. Is there a mature believer in your church with whom you could discuss your situation and your discomfort about revealing this information to church leaders? What insights and wise advice could they offer about moving forward? Hard as it may be to bring issues into the open, they seldom are resolved if hidden behind a pretense that all is well.

Church missions leaders' questions about your overall financial situation have legitimacy if they make funding decisions based on need. However, if there are extenuating past or present circumstances that impact your financial situation, you need to clarify the situation with fuller explanations. Initiate a frank conversation, trying not to be defensive.

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WE'LL BE FINE

Few of the issues described by the workers in their survey responses developed overnight. Many allude to a long period of deepening problems. What if there had been intervention much earlier in the development of what now is potentially a ministry-threatening crisis?

The reasons why a worker is reticent to face problems vary. Maybe they believe that God does, or should, divinely enable them to keep going no matter what internal struggles they have. Maybe they believe you think they should be able to cope on their own. Most missionaries are driven by a sense of responsibility for the work that likely would go undone if they were to step away from ministry to address problems and rest. Sometimes a worker fears having to come home permanently

without marketable skills to support themselves and their family.

Fortunately, younger generations often are more willing to admit struggles and more ready to seek and accept help. But regardless of age and length of time on the field, everyone needs space and often outside help to resolve painful issues and make course corrections before they become deeply harmful to themselves, others, and their ministry.

Church leaders. Many missionary budgets do not include funds for regular vacations, and shorter home assignments do not allow for any extended rest periods or renewal activities. Maybe the kindest thing you can do for your workers is hold them accountable to take time off. If they do not have the funds, find out why. Perhaps you need to make a special gift to cover costs for a retreat or time just relaxing away from responsibilities.

If your worker, spouse, and/or children would benefit from a conference, retreat, training course, counseling, or residential restoration program, will your church cover the cost of travel and attendance? Offer; don't wait for them to ask! This type of need sometimes arises quickly and underlines the need for a healthy contingency line item in your missions budget to cover such expenses without scrambling for funds.

While your responsibility is greater for your sent workers, many of the missionaries you support may not have a sending body that invests in their personal flourishing. Is God calling you to a missionary care role for them too?

Missionaries. Please don't see your church's request for reports and accountability as a negative, "We're ready to criticize your failures" situation. Instead, view it as an opportunity for you (and your spouse, if you are married) to stop and critique how well you and your ministry are doing.

What are the problems, small or large, that are sapping energy and creating distance between you and God, or you and others? Take the risk of talking to your church about what would be most life-giving to you at this time. Yes, being vulnerable is a risk, but one worth taking!

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DO YOU REALLY CARE ABOUT ME?

Behind their reluctance to talk about difficult issues, missionaries may be wrestling with deeper questions, questions like:

Do you truly value me as an individual, or am I really just an instrument to help you fulfill your missions obligation? Do you see me as more important than the tasks I accomplish, the souls I win, or the ROI I can point to?

Will you stand behind me despite the fact that I am broken by sin, often inadequate to the task, and spiritually needy? Do you see me and my family as valuable enough that you will walk alongside us spiritually, emotionally, and financially through a process to address the issues that I have been afraid to talk about with you?

As a church leader, how would you answer these questions? You too are broken by sin and inadequate to the task. Are you humble and transparent about your weaknesses, and eager to support your worker who is a fellow disciple under development?

This two-part series has raised issues that are not resolved with pat answers or a simple, “take a vacation” or “see a counselor” response. How can you and your missionaries walk humbly together for the cause of the gospel and the flourishing of your workers, your church, and the global Body of Christ?

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