

Choosing Sending Partners—1

how churches find the best agency fit

by Ellen Livingood

In simpler times, prospective missionaries chose and joined an agency that was working where they wanted to serve. Thereafter, their church sent support checks to this agency which took full responsibility for whatever administration, guidance, and care was provided.

This model is rapidly disappearing with the explosion of global partnerships, creative ministry opportunities, and younger generations' shifting expectations. Today, prospective workers and their sending churches can consider a wide range of options. They can choose the one they believe will best facilitate ministry impact, support the workers' wellbeing, and maximize the involvement of the church.

This month's article focuses on questions churches could ask potential mission agency partners if they want to work



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under the most common current model: In this approach, workers become members of an agency in their home country and serve under the leadership of the same organization in the field, while the sending church has varying degrees of involvement. Our discussion will revolve around choosing the best agency partner for that scenario. (Next month's issue will focus on some of the newer sending scenarios.)

Below are 10 areas of agency service and questions that can be asked to determine the organization's value-added. The goal is to help your church find a good agency fit.



Commitment to Church Collaboration

Most agencies say they want to partner with the sending church, but working hand in hand with local congregations demands time and resources. If the agency isn't ready or able to invest significantly, true partnership will be limited, regardless of good intentions.

Measuring an Agency's Value-Added

- What are several of the best models of partnering with churches the agency is currently engaged in?
- How are they helping their field personnel to expand their partnership capacity?
- What resources do they offer churches to build their partnering ability?
- What are their expectations of sending churches, and how do they follow up in order to help churches fulfill their sending role?



Candidate Screening and Assessment

The issue of evaluating prospective missionaries has sometimes been clouded by either/or thinking that as-

signs this responsibility to either the church or the agency. Certainly the sending church should be included in the screening process, but this does not negate the equally important contribution of an agency in evaluating individuals' fit and readiness.

Both church and agency can suffer from blind spots. Church leaders have told me, after worker deficiencies surfaced, "We were so eager to send people that we did not evaluate them objectively enough." Agencies can also be over eager to accept new workers.

Measuring an Agency's Value-Added

- How robust is the agency's applicant screening process? What types of testing and personal interviews are used to assess qualifications and readiness?
- What input (beyond just a written reference) is requested from the sending church?
- What additional preparation requirements do they often give to applicants and new appointees?



- How are major conflicts resolved? When/How are sending churches involved in conflict resolution?
- What decisions involve the input of the sending church?

4 Missionary Care

Your congregation is responsible to provide shepherding and care for your workers as though they were still a part of your local body—and actually they are, even if not physically present. Simultaneously, your agency partner should bring to the task specialized missionary-care expertise to make sure your workers are healthy and issues are addressed before they become crises.

Measuring an Agency's Value-Added

- How does the agency monitor the spiritual/physical/emotional health of their missionaries and their families?
- What resources do they dedicate to caring for missionaries and their children?
- What crisis-intervention systems are in place, and what care is typically given in crisis situations? How does the agency work with the sending church in a crisis?

3 Leadership and Accountability

Fielding missionaries with an agency creates three-way accountability that can be fairly simple or rather complex. Many churches opt to share leadership when workers are home-side but delegate the responsibility to the agency when missionaries are on the field.

It is hard to overestimate the value of quality, experienced, on-the-ground leaders and mentors. Agencies must invest in developing them over the long haul.

Measuring an Agency's Value-Added

- On average, how many individuals report to a given field leader? How often do they meet face to face?
- What missionary evaluation systems are in place and how are inadequacies addressed? Are sending churches informed about, and/or involved in, the evaluation and remediation process?

5 Financial Services

First, churches need to be sure of the financial viability of any potential agency partner. One mission agency recently closed its doors overnight, leaving field workers stranded. In these financially challenging times, agencies are facing serious economic pressures. It is the church's responsibility to know a partner agency's fiscal health.

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Second, sending churches should be confident that their partner agency keeps up with current government requirements (in both sending and receiving countries) and handles finances with highest integrity. For some organizations, non-compliance is not a result of flagrant disregard for the law but a lack of financial leadership that can't stay current on ever-changing regulations.

Third, churches need to understand their potential partner's financial requirements and policies for missionary support. This includes how support structures are established and whether minimums are waved even when workers are seriously under-supported.

Measuring an Agency's Value-Added

- Review several years of financial audits. Look for trends and don't be afraid to ask probing questions. Is the agency an [ECFA](#) member?
- How are missionary support levels determined and what does the support structure include? (Take the time to understand what may be a complex answer.) If support drops, what areas are cut first and why? Are workers allowed to go to/stay on the field if they are severely under-supported?
- Must/Can workers raise additional funds for educational debt, vehicles, children's education, etc.?
- What assistance do missionaries receive in building their support-raising skills and in pursuing the fund-discovery process?
- Is it anticipated that pension and government benefits will adequately cover retirement needs, or is it assumed donors will continue support?



Some Westerners tend to discount the value of the past, assume that a 30-minute conversation builds a foundation for trust, and overestimate their ability to discern character and partner readiness. The truth is that the best mission agencies have invested decades building healthy relationships with their national colleagues. This hard-won respect is a huge benefit to a new arrival.

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On the flip side, there are situations where agency/national-church relationships have soured. In such situations, fielding people attached to that agency means shouldering the baggage of past failures.

Measuring an Agency's Value-Added

- How does the agency determine when and where they will launch a new ministry effort? What research and planning take place in order to be excellent stewards of personnel, funds, and other resources?
- What is the agency's posture toward collaboration with nationals? Are they creatively developing new alliances with global partners?
- What is the history of collaboration on the particular field where you anticipate sending workers? Ask nationals and workers with other organizations about the agency's reputation.

6 Field Research

Recently a detailed field survey report crossed my desk. This on-location study was conducted by two veteran agency workers who canvassed a spiritually untouched area of a Majority World nation. From start to finish, it was obvious that these guys were experienced researchers, and that their insights were based on decades of living and building relationships in this country. The study was part of extensive groundwork this agency was investing in preparing to field a team to this new place.

Does your church realize the work, and the value of the work, that top-notch agencies do in this area of research and surveying? Thorough groundwork can avoid costly mistakes and save months, even years, of effort.

7 Government Relationships

Gaining and maintaining the right to live and work in some countries is growing more challenging. Those without an in-country structure often come to agency veterans for help in navigating the intricacies of government bureaucracy and a host of other issues. The help they receive calls on decades of relationship building by field personnel who have the knowledge and connections to cut through red tape, deal with officials, etc.

This help can demand time measured in days, even weeks, not hours. After agency workers have invested so much effort, it is frustrating to hear those who benefit-

ted declare their self sufficiency and the irrelevance of agencies. You may be able to put a price on a visa or residence permit, but the relationship needed to get that paper may, indeed, be priceless.

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Measuring an Agency's Value-Added

- What is the agency's history in the country to which you anticipate sending workers? Do they have missionaries who have been there long enough to have extensive connections in-country?
- If this is a new field, what resources will the agency invest to make sure this new launch is well planned and resourced?



8 Lifelong Learning

Personal development is a growing value among top-drawer mission agencies. Distance-learning opportunities make some forms of training accessible to anyone. However, it is easy to postpone tracking down the best resources and carving out the time for extended learning unless it is an organizational priority.

Field workers are blessed who belong to an agency that maximizes their potential by making sure that practical, specialized learning and personal development are integral parts of ministry life.

Measuring an Agency's Value-Added

- What types of life-long learning did the agency provide for their missionaries during the past year?
- Do missionaries' assignments include time designated for learning, or is it something they do on their own?

9 Team Members and a Global Community

One of the most crucial issues for missionaries is the choice of colleagues. In this era of fluid networks and collaborative alliances, many field teams include mem-

bers from various agencies and those serving independently. Is there value, then, to being part of an agency team?

It depends. Team building is challenging enough without syphoning off energy to address foundational differences between colleagues. Therefore, an automatic, on-field connection has benefit., especially for new workers. At the same time, having the option to join or build a broader team is valuable too.

Missionaries also benefit from being part of a larger community of cross-cultural workers who share their values and goals. Regional and even global fellowship with like-minded workers is personally refreshing and professionally stimulating. Multiethnic collaboration expands perspective.

Measuring an Agency's Value-Added

- How much energy does the agency invest in building and maintaining healthy, high-functioning teams?
- How are teams established? Are workers free to join teams not connected to their agency or their agency's national partners?
- How multi-national is the agency and their teams on the field?

10 Services to Sending/ Supporting Churches

As a congregation, you want to keep growing in your ability to field missionaries, provide care, and partner with them effectively. Agencies of excellence are highly committed to seeing your church function at peak missions capacity. They want to provide resources and assistance to help you cast vision, determine priorities and strategy, and build stable missions leadership.

Wise counsel, effective coaching, and powerful communication tools are highly valuable but come at a cost. Even if your church doesn't need outside help, the vast majority of congregations do. Your willingness to collaborate with mission agencies and to underwrite some of these ser-

vices to local churches can be a wise investment in the next generations and their missions involvement.

Measuring an Agency's Value Added

- What specific services does the agency offer to help local churches like yours?
- What tools and other resources do they provide to help your church grow your missions impact?

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Churches—Has this list increased your understanding of, and appreciation for, quality mission agencies? I hope it will encourage you to ask questions, choose agency partners wisely, and be willing to invest more time and effort into building strategic partnerships with the global ministries that best match your passions and needs.

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If you are dissatisfied with the services or stewardship of a mission agency, could you help them improve? Ask about the challenges they face, then explore ways to help them clear hurdles. There may be individuals in your congregation with skills to assist them in strategic planning, financial assessments, communications, etc. Involvement will be a win/win.

Will you commit to pray more regularly for your mission-agency partners? The leaders and staff who support the field workers have challenging tasks. Why not call a mission headquarters just to say thank-you and to pray with them? Building your partnership is worth the effort.

Agencies—Are you prepared to respond to churches that ask the types of questions listed in this article? How are you proving your value-added to church partners? What are some key areas you need to address?



Ellen Livingood launched and leads Catalyst Services to further church/agency collaboration. She works with churches and mission organizations to unleash the untapped potential of God's people.

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