**Caring for the Whole Missionary Family from a Smaller Church**

Every church would like to be able to provide comprehensive care for their missionary families, but feel they lack the staff to make it possible. What does it really take to give the care our missionaries deserve? Join us in a discussion on how to provide care that makes a difference. The small church can provide more personal care than the larger churches can even without professional training. We will discuss when and where to go for help when you feel you don’t have the resources to meet the need. We will look at the key elements of care that each church, regardless of size can implement to make the families of their messenger’s feel loved and cared for.

* **Our story:**

It was June of 1981 we had just left Guatemala discouraged, confused and wondering whether the New Testament that we had left with the Acatecos would be used and if the church would survive the takeover of the country by the communist forces.

We were visiting our supporters and churches but our hearts and minds were with the people that we had spent the last 12 years serving and living amongst. Many had already been killed or driven out of the country, including two men that I had worked very closely with on community development projects. My best friend, Matias was in hiding praying that I would be able to find a way for him to come to the U S legally.

We wanted to share with people, but no one seemed interested in hearing about our struggles. The weather and sports were much easier things to talk about. We felt like aliens in our home land. It was then that I began to realize that churches needed to be given tools to help them in caring for their missionaries, whether they were coming home rejoicing in the victories God had given them or hurting and disillusioned as we were.

All churches want to care for their missionaries, but many are not aware of what they can or should be doing. Not having served away from home themselves they don’t always realize the issues involved in being ambassadors for Christ in a different land and culture.

Let’s look at the whole situation and attempt to identify the key elements of good care for the entire family of our missionaries. By stating family we include singles, families with children and those who are who for one reason or another serve singly.

* **When should the church provide care?**

There are several events in the life of those sent out when it is particularly critical that care is needed:

1. While in preparation for going.
2. The first year or two in service.
3. When there is a crisis:
   1. Family issues; health, death of a family member at home, emotional issues that develop because of the added stress of cross-cultural ministry.
   2. Political crisis in the target country.
   3. Natural disasters.
4. When returning for home assignment.
5. Transition’s for children.
6. Changing assignment or completion of ministry

* **How does the church know when additional care is needed?**
  1. Frequent communication with them.
     1. By email
     2. Telephone, via Skype or other inexpensive international systems.
     3. Personal visits.
  2. Appointing a small support team of their friends that commit themselves to keeping close contact with them.
     1. This is not a group that is evaluating their ministry.
     2. They are there only for non-judgmental support as friends.
        + This allows the missionary to be transparent and share personal issues without risk.
        + This provides a channel for communication that probably is not available through co-workers and mission supervisors.
     3. This team will at times need to share things with the church leadership and possibly with the mission administrators, but:
        + This needs to be done only with the knowledge of the missionary.
        + They need to be given the option of communicating directly with the church leadership or mission administrators.
  3. There will be times when there will be the need to find care from someone outside of this team.
     1. This team can be a go between for the missionary in suggesting outside resources.
     2. This should only be done with the knowledge and approval of the missionary.
     3. Exceptions to this rule.
        + When there is immediate concern for the life of the missionary.
        + When others are in danger of injury or death caused by them.
        + If the missionary is causing harm to themselves or others or the ministry, but refuses to deal with the issues.
     4. Where do you go for help when it appears beyond your ability to handle?
        + First check with the mission sending agency.
          - They may already be working on this or can be of help in determing where to go for further help.
        + Check with other supporting churches, especially the “Sending Church”. (this needs to be done with great care.)
        + There are many great counselling services availble for this help.
          - MRC
          - Brian and Debbie Aho, (presenters at this conference) Developing and Shepherding International, Brainerd, MN
          - Link Care
          - Many others, check with some of the larger churches in the area for suggestions.

This list of responsibilities seems way too great for a small church to deal with and if they happen frequently it certainly is, however these are not daily nor even monthly occurrences. Many situations will be completely avoided by establishing the lines of communication listed above.

* **What is possible for the smaller churches to provide?**
  1. A support team for each missionary supported by the church.
  2. Opportunities for the missionary to report to the church when:
     1. The missionary is ready to leave for assignment.
        + Initial assignment
        + Before returning to assignment
        + When returning home from assignment
        + Whenever the missionary is spending time in the area of the church.
        + In the smaller church this can be done by providing a special time, with a meal, to give them opportunity to share and for the church to ask questions of them.
  3. Regular opportunities for the support team to share the ministry with the entire church.
     1. Through sharing non-confidential reports and newsletters
     2. Giving a short report to the congregation during the Sunday service.
     3. Sharing significant events in the life of the missionary and family.
  4. Including the entire missionary family in reports and in events that the church hosts for them.
     1. The wife is equally important in the ministry and should be acknowledged and given opportunity to share as she feels the freedom to do. There are several situations that I know of where the wife is the real missionary and the one who carries the load of ministry, but we seldom acknowledge this.
     2. Making sure that the children feel comfortable and at home is absolutely essential. Insisting that they preform by singing or speaking in the language of their adopted country is normally not appreciated by them. Some, however really enjoy it, but each child should be given the freedom to do so or not without feeling pressure.
  5. Show interest in their ministry and family. Ask questions so they feel free to share and update them on what has been happening in the church and the community. This will alleviate the feelings of being aliens.
* **It is important for the church to understand that the relationship with a missionary is a shared relationship.**

There are at least three entities involved in the relationship and at times more.

* 1. Entities involved.
     1. The missionary
     2. The mission organization
     3. The sending church
     4. Other entities possibly involved
        + The church on the field
        + The mission administration on the field
        + Other churches that give support
        + Extended family
        + Others
  2. The church will probably not be able to relate directly with all of these, but the missionary knows who is involved so you can ask them, Who else needs to be involved when you and we are making any decision?
  3. One thing that is absolutely essential to remember is these are not adversarial relationships between these entities. They can develop into that, but these are partnering with everyone desiring the best for everyone else.