WHAT TO DO WITH LEGACY MISSIONARIES

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Category: Observations

One of the things that can frustrate church leaders as they try to develop a strategy for involvement in world mission is the question of legacy missionaries. Legacy missionaries are people that the church has supported for years, perhaps even decades, but with whom (for one reason or another) they have very little ongoing contact or relationship.

There are all sorts of reasons why a church might support legacy missionaries. Perhaps the missionary is a friend of a former church member or pastor. At one time there was a close connection to the missionary, but over time that has withered as people have moved on. It could be that at some point in the past, the church was looking to support overseas mission work in some way and hunted around for a suitable missionary, but over time the connection has faded.

Let me hurriedly add that in using the term legacy missionary (my own invention) I am not commenting on the usefulness of the work that the missionary does. All that is in focus is the link between the missionary and a particular church congregation.

The problem is that many churches in the UK are small and they have limited resources. Support for legacy missionaries can make a significant dent in their ability to support world mission in a way which is relevant and appealing to the current congregation. I would argue that it is better all-round for churches to have a well-informed and enthusiastic commitment to mission, than to simply continue to support a missionary because they have always done so.

So what should be done?

The simplest solution is probably to re-engage with the legacy missionary in such a way that the connection becomes live vibrant once more. There are all sorts of reasons why a commitment to a missionary can tail off and the fault can lie on the side of the missionary or the church - most likely both at once. However, there are presumably positive reasons why the church started to support the missionary in the first place, so it may well be worth trying to revive the relationship.

However, we need to face up to the fact that churches move on and missionaries move on and it may well not be possible or desirable to re-engage. Sometimes a fresh start is the best way forward.

In this case, the answer is simple; stop supporting the missionary.

Well, it's not quite so simple in practice, but the principle is easy. Firstly, the process should involve a

lot of communication. There will inevitably be a few congregation members who feel committed to the legacy missionary and who will be hurt or angry at the decision to stop supporting them. This can be mitigated (though not avoided entirely) by clear communication which shows how the church's support will be rechanneled into something that is closer to the heart of the church.

You need to communicate with the missionary, too. However loose the connection to your church, the loss of a monthly check can pose real problems. However, most missionaries fully understand the difficulties of working with limited resources and will be sympathetic to the church's plight. Don't simply stop supporting them, communicate the decision a few months in advance. It might be good to provide a parting gift to the missionary at the end of your support. If things aren't too tense, (and regulations allow) you could invite them to speak to the church as a farewell.

The bottom line is that a church is not obligated to continue supporting a legacy missionary in perpetuity. You can withdraw your support as long as you do so graciously.

A couple of caveats:

The situation is distinctly more complex when it comes to mission partners that the church itself has commissioned. If you have set someone apart for mission work, then you need to keep supporting them. If your finances don't allow you to do so, then you must work with the missionary and others to ensure that the work carries on. On the other hand, if you feel that it is no longer appropriate to support their work in other ways, then you should help the missionary transition to a new career. As the congregation that commissions a missionary, your obligations run deeper than just setting up a monthly standing order.

The second caveat should go without saying, but I'll say it anyway. Churches that call themselves evangelical, should have some interest in global mission. Ending your support for a legacy missionary should not end your involvement in what God is doing outside of the UK, if it does, you are making a big mistake.

One last thought; you may feel that I am being cruel in saying that churches should consider ending their support for legacy missionaries. My reply would simply be that I am a missionary and I probably fall into the legacy category. To be honest, I may well be shooting myself in the foot writing this, but my position means that I can say things to church leaders that others may not be willing to say.