MISSIONARY ACCOUNTABILITY

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Traditionally, missionary work is organised something like this. A home church recognises an individual's call to mission and agrees to support them in their ministry. The individual applies to a mission agency who places them in an assignment somewhere in the world. The details of the missionaries work are generally worked out between the local office of the mission agency and the church (if there is one) in the place of assignment.

This might seem complicated, but in many cases it is a simplification. For example, although a church might recognise a missionary's call to service, they may not be able to provide all of the financial support that they need and so the missionary candidate has to find other churches or individuals who will contribute to their work.

In this network of relationships, who exactly is the missionary responsible to?

Let's think about the work that they do, for starters.

Their home church are the ones who are actually paying for the work, so they have a right to speak into the situation. Perhaps they have a clear picture of what they want their missionary to achieve, or maybe they have a view as to the denomination that the missionary should work with on the field.

The home office of the mission agency have to ensure that they are meeting their charitable objectives, so they need to ensure that the missionary is contributing to that end.

The field office might have local contracts and responsibilities that they need to meet and the local church may have very strong views as to what they want foreigners to be doing in their back yard.

On top of all of this, the missionary will probably have a strong sense of "call" which determines what they think they should do.

In the real world, it is unlikely that all of these different voices will be in agreement about the missionary's role. It is impractical for all of the parties to sit together and come to some agreement, so typically, some parties (who have a legitimate interest) are simply excluded and a smaller group decides what the missionary should do.

This then raises the questions as to who are the key parties in these sorts of discussions? The

answer should spring from our theology, not simply from what is the most pragmatic answer.

Or think about another question; to whom is the missionary accountable as a disciple of Jesus? We tend to think of missionaries as people who go and make disciples, but first and foremost they need to be disciples themselves. All of us need encouragement and challenge from the body of Christ and specifically, we need to committed to a community which will help us grow and mature. Missionaries are typically members of a number of different types of communities, so who is responsible (or who should be) for helping them to grow as believers?

The thing is, when everything is going well, these questions don't tend to arise. We can get by without concerning ourselves with them. However, when issues and disagreements crop up, or perhaps when a missionary faces deep pastoral needs (it happens), clarity becomes essential.

To be honest, I don't have any solid answers to these questions, but here are a few observations.

Agencies and supporting churches need to talk through these things from the outset of an individual's missionary service. You can't wait until a crisis hits to deal with the complex web of relationships. It is particularly acute if an individual is supported by a range of different churches; in that case, the missionary's "sending" church needs to be in contact with all of the others, so that communication and responsibility can flow.

A second thought is that our traditional system is just too complex. There are other models for supporting missionary work and perhaps we need to look at them.

Lastly, all too often, the people who have the least to say in these discussions are the local churches with whom the missionaries work - and yet they are the ones who are most impacted by them. When this is the case, change needs to come soon.