I GET PAID FOR WRITING LETTERS

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Some thoughts inspired by my inability to write a newsletter.
Category: Observations

Yesterday, I started work on our latest (much delayed) newsletter. I have to admit that it isn't the aspect of my work that I enjoy the most. Even when we lived in an African village, doing exciting things - translating the New Testament and suffering from malaria - I found it difficult to come up with stuff to write about. These days, when I spend my life staring at a laptop, writing blog posts and reading mission agency financial reports, it is almost impossible to think of anything interesting. Thankfully, Sue's work as a translation consultant provides something of interest for our supporters.

As is often the case, my failure to actually produce any words on the page, caused me to think about what it is I was actually doing and here are a few thoughts.

I get paid for writing letters. Since I left my job at Southampton University, in 1984, I have not received a regular salary. I do get paid for the odd consulting job that I do for various organisations, but these are few and far between. For the main part, our income comes from churches and friends who support us because of the work we do. However, these kind supporters have almost no access to the actual work itself. The only things they know about the things we do are what we write in letters. This was very true when we lived in Africa, but it still applies today.

Our Supporters are Generous and Trusting. Every month, the standing orders come in and we have enough to live on thanks to the amazing generosity of our supporters. It is amazing to me that folks have continued to be generous for so long, with so little concrete evidence that their money is actually achieving anything. Yes, we can show photographs of published Scriptures and I can talk about agencies that I have helped, but the folks who support all of this don't actually benefit from the work and see very little tangible output.

Prayer Letters are Important. In this context, missionary prayer letters are essential to maintaining relationships and encouraging supporters. I started off by saying that I find it really difficult to write our newsletter, but that doesn't reduce its importance.

The System is Open To Abuse. People give generously to support us and the main window they have into the impact of their giving is our newsletters. It is easy to see how this could be manipulated. We have always tried to be open and honest in our communications with supporters, but there are almost certainly times when we have put a positive spin on things. The temptation to sound better than we are is always there and I'd be surprised if we hadn't fallen pray to it from time to time - even if unintentionally. However, I have seen missionary (and mission agency) communications that have given me serious cause for concern.

Social Media is Not *THE* Answer. I used to believe that social media would replace the need for missionary newsletters, but I'm less convinced by that now. Partly, this is because the various algorithms used by platforms such as Facebook mean that you can never be sure who will see what. It is not a reliable form for communication. Another issue is the fact that most of the people who follow me on Twitter, Facebook and the like (and who read this blog) are colleagues rather than supporters. I suspect that some younger missionaries are making platforms such as Instagram work for them, but the regular email still has life in it.

Face To Face Contact Is Best. In the end, you can't beat face to face contact for building relationships between missionaries and supporters. This isn't easy for introverts like me, but it is essential.

Is This System Viable? I do wonder for how long missionary support can continue in the way that it has done for most of my career. My suspicion is that we will slowly see the "faith missionary" approach that we have lived with being replaced by a more formal salary structure, with mission agencies being much more active in employing their staff, setting goals and reviewing progress. There are already a number of agencies that work in this way.