

Missionary (Non)Retirement

(Note: I have used the generic 'he' for convenience and readability. Since the majority of missionaries are women, I perhaps should have used 'she'.)

For some time, especially since the 2008 economic downturn, many church leaders have been anticipating the retirement of their older, longer-term workers so that funds can be freed up for reinvesting in new missionaries, projects, and partnerships. However, many aging missionaries are not retiring, leaving church leaders anxious about funding new opportunities. Church leaders are struggling with maintaining the support of long term missionaries while straining at the bit to initiate new work. This article is intended to help church leaders consider several perspectives to help them make wise support decisions.

Why are missionaries not retiring?

Missionaries are staying in ministry longer for a number of reasons. Some missionaries work longer because they are still healthy and fulfilled. Some missionaries continue to work because their experience and networks have put them at the height of their productivity. Mission agencies have become more flexible, allowing missionaries to continue working under a variety of conditions, including distant locations. Some older missionaries have been transferred into positions where their experience is particularly valuable, such as coaching, advising, consulting or managing roles. Because of the decline of our communities and influx of internationals, missionaries formerly working overseas have found productive areas of ministry at home where they can continue to minister and remain healthy.

Some continue because they have are esteemed in their current roles and fear the loss of their position. For some, missionary life is all they know. They are unprepared for a different life and unable or unwilling to face it. It is much easier to continue in their current ministry. And some continue because they have inadequate provision for retirement and staying active in missions continues to provide support income. For many, there is a combination of reasons.

What are some factors church leaders should consider in making funding decisions?

The perspective of the missionary

A church may be able to make improved judgments if they know the missionary well. What are his experiences, his gifts, his roles, his goals, his network, his context, his hopes, his reputation, and his fruit? Do we know about his health, his relationships, his financial situation, his web of family and friends, his prospects? Why is the missionary continuing in ministry? Is it interest, passion, fulfillment, community, fear, or necessity?

Too often, while the missionary has been serving in a location away from our church, church leaders have become disconnected from him and know little about his work, his effectiveness,

and his personal life. This may be the fault of poor communication from the missionary. But sometimes it has been a breakdown on the church's end. There is a very real tendency (I know, for I have found it in myself) to assume that if you don't know about it, it's not happening. We must be cautious about making assumptions about a missionary's contribution based on our ignorance. Understanding the missionary's situation can help church leaders make wise decisions.

The perspective of the multiplying roles available for workers today

Over the past several years I have noticed a trend of missionaries responsible for overseas work operating primarily from a US base. At the moment I can think of missionaries responsible for work in Latin America, Central Europe, and China who are living in the U.S. I ask myself--and you do also--can these missionaries be as effective as they were when they were living in the nation where they were working? I suspect it varies widely. The possible productive roles for missionaries has expanded and, thanks to internet bandwidth, camcorders, and Skype, distance is a much smaller factor than it used to be. In other words, it should not be automatically assumed that a missionary based in the US, where he may be able to live healthier longer, is not productive and useful. Why is the person living in the US and not on the field? Are these reasons related to health, family, convenience, finances, or job responsibilities and effectiveness? Some jobs can be done better from a US base and others not.

The perspective of missionary effectiveness and productivity

A larger question is whether the missionary is productive, effective, and fruitful. In the past we have all known of situations where missionaries were placed in roles where they didn't fit and didn't do very well. Many years ago, one mission executive admitted such to me, but lamented that they couldn't just dismiss people who had contributed overseas many years and had no place to go, no source of income, and no marketable skills in the US. Changes in mission organizations and in our world have minimized but not eliminated these situations. It has been said that one person may have twenty years' experience while another simply has one years' experience twenty times. Is your missionary is on top of his game or coasting?

The perspective of Kingdom contribution

A further question asks not just whether the missionary is efficient in his role, but how critical and strategic is that role? A person might be excellent in his position, but is that position critical to Kingdom advancement? Some people may be very efficient and productive in a minor role that could be easily replaced while another worker may be in a crucial role that would be very difficult to fill without his experience and gifts. In my view, this is the biggest factor in decision-making. To what degree is the worker contributing to the advancement of the Kingdom.

While it is desirable and important to get new missionaries to the field and to initiate and fund important new projects and partnerships, there may be times it is more strategic to support a highly experienced, fully contributing missionary than a novice. What kind of work does the missionary do? What are the purposes and goals for which he strives? Is he involved in ministry that is highly strategic and effective? Is there multiplication or leverage? Is he training future missionaries, workers, or leaders? Does he have expertise and experience that is not

easily replaced? Is he serving a crucial need in an important organization? How would you evaluate his kingdom contribution? How valuable and important is he to his mission organization? One church asks for a letter from the mission organization explaining why the missionary is still important for each missionary over age 65.

The perspective of local church strategy and objectives

Church leaders are becoming increasingly proactive in missions, pursuing goals and strategies they believe will be most productive for kingdom expansion and that best fit with the values and gifting of their church. So a natural question is whether current, older missionaries fit well with a church's priorities. Again, I find that churches often have too little information about their missionary to know how well their goals and the missionary's ministry are aligned. Some churches have developed a new strategy and been surprised when their in-depth conversations with their missionaries revealed they were much closer in objectives than they realized. If the missionary is not in line with a church's new strategies, it may be useful to ask whether the missionary is continuing to pursue directions approved by the church in the past. Honoring the missionary may mean grandfathering him for a few years, if the church that has changed direction, not the missionary.

The perspective of funding

Church leaders are focused on the retirement--or not--of missionaries largely because of funding limitations. Financial pressures always bring about reassessment and revisions. This is good and healthy if it is done wisely and fairly.

Funding has increasingly become an issue for several reasons. The economic decline has hit many churches. A number of churches that were previously growing have reached a plateau in attendance and giving. Other demands and opportunities for funding have increased. And some churches have a growing queue of potential workers.

Some churches are shifting funds previously used for supporting fulltime workers, both in the U.S. and overseas, to invest in projects that have concrete goals and time limitations. Many churches are using an increasing amount of their mission budget for short-term ministries that involve many of their church people. Some are shifting funds from overseas ministries to compelling needs in their cities and urban communities. Some are focusing more on multiple campuses extending the reach of the home church. The pressures of keeping up with advancing technology, upgrading facilities, and adding staff, continually increase the cost of 'doing church.' Some have found it necessary to dip into mission funds to temporarily assist with facilities construction or a shortfall with a Christian school, etc.

While considering what to do about older missionaries, it is important to ask bigger questions about overall allocation of church and mission resources. Does the church have a fair balance of resources allotted for the globally unevangelized and needy as well as those locally? Are we taking the longer view for our investments? Do we need a reassessment of church priorities? Is the overall missions budget used wisely, for strategic ministries, and not too much of it redirected to primarily benefit ourselves? How are we doing with stewardship of personal finances? Talking about money in church is not popular. Are people tithing? Are we titheing?

Perhaps approaching funding decisions from these several perspectives will give church leaders additional insight to make wise decisions regarding their non-retiring missionaries.

