

## Five Things Your Missionary Wants you to Know

I can remember the time when as a family we traveled and raised support for our missionary service in Eastern Europe. There were a lot of letters written, churches visited and miles in the car (that meant a lot of Odyssey and Psalty!)

Staying in homes and speaking in churches brought us in contact with many families – most of them with young children like our family—all of them with a heart to see the gospel go forward around the world. Often when we shared meals and conversations we heard comments such as, “I don’t think we could ever do what you are doing.” Or “You must be special to do this; visit churches, raise money and go to a foreign place”. We really wanted people to know that our family was much like theirs, but also to understand that we had a call on our lives and we were eager to see how God would meet our needs.

After our time on the mission field and now having been involved for over ten years in missionary care, we have learned that as much as you share with people there may are some things that can be hard to communicate yet these things are very important in the life of your missionary.

To preview these things they include: Your missionary wants you to know they are just as human as you are, their finances are almost always a concern, your missionary wants to be valued for who they are and not compared to other missionaries, there are things they need to tell someone – but it may not be you or their supporting churches and most important of all: they love what they are doing and are doing it out of a deep conviction and call of God -- so let’s encourage them in that call and mission.

Let’s look more in depth at these five things that will help you understand your missionaries and help you better pray for them.

### 1. **Missionaries are not “super people”.**

While the missionary definitely has a special calling on their lives—who else would do this?—missionaries don’t want to be put up on a pedestal or set aside in a special way that makes them seem like someone who isn’t like everyone else. The missionary family that you may be holding up as “something special” is just as likely to have had an argument with their kids while driving to church that morning. Their struggles are not so different from yours, but they live in the public eye: churches, mission boards, “concerned” friends – and this can be an added stress in the life of the missionary family.

They have worked hard to be at the place they are: education, more education, specialized training, applying for missionary service, language and culture study – these things don’t make them “super people” but they are “super committed” to the call of God on their lives. Yes, they are willing to travel to raise support, meet with hundreds of people and expose their kids to a lifestyle that can be very different from their peers, but deep down they are not super human.

You can ***pray that your missionaries will have the perseverance and patience*** to do the things that God has asked of them; you may not be aware of the times of discouragement and frustration that can be part of support-raising as well as the feelings of loneliness and separation once on the field. ***Your missionaries want and need your prayer support and encouragement in their lives.*** Pray for God’s grace in their lives as they travel, speak and share and live in this very public place.

## 2. It doesn't matter what they tell you, they are under-supported.

It's kind of a strange thing being responsible to raise your own salary. Normally we go to work for someone else and receive a salary for the work done. Also, your employer participates in the "hidden costs" of your employment: state and federal taxes as well as any benefit packages you might receive.

How is all of this decided anyway? Based on the cost of living in the country where your missionary is serving (or will serve), as well as their family size and other factors such as outgoing expense, retirement savings, home assignment funds and travel expenses, the mission agency or sending church will determine the amount of "monthly support" the missionary needs to raise. This figure is designed to cover their life on the field as well as the necessary trips back to their home country as well as providing for their future. When you hear missionaries talking about the "percentage" of support they have raised, it is in relation to the "100%" figure that the mission has given them. The goal is that when they have 100% of their support they can leave for the field.

What you may not know is that some missions have no planned savings or retirement built into the missionary budget; there is ***no margin for emergencies or other unplanned expenses***. Not only do some organizations not factor these things in, some missionaries and organizations see it as unnecessary because they are "living by faith". In a line from one of my favorite movies, an old curmudgeon overhears the priest saying that the workers "lived by faith"; he remarks "that simply means they weren't paid properly." We as supporters expect that our employers will take care of our needs, but sometimes we don't see that our missionaries need the same level of care. Yes, God does provide for our missionaries in great ways, and our family has been the recipients of such provision, ***but too often your missionaries live on the thin edge of not having enough to meet their basic needs.***

When missionaries are raising support they are very focused on "getting on the field"; that is the kind of people they are: committed, devoted, persistent and motivated. But too often in our haste to get them to their place of service combined with their enthusiasm to get to this place God has called them, we don't do a good job of making sure that their needs are going to be met – both immediate and long term.

Here are some factors that your missionary may not tell you about their support – but you need to know.

While most people are generous and well-intentioned, there are those who pledge support to a missionary and they ***never follow through***. So, your missionary can tell you their support is at a certain percentage, but the reality is that there are those who will never give.

Things happen. There are those who pledge support and then events in their life take unplanned turns. They may lose a job, experience a major illness or experience some other life change that keeps them from continuing their planned giving.

Another factor that I have heard more about is that churches that pledge a significant amount of support to a missionary later change their "focus of giving" and ***they cut all or nearly all*** of their support to the missionary. How would you feel if your employer told you that he didn't feel as committed to what you are doing and they were going to reduce your salary by fifteen, twenty or thirty percent—but he still expected you to show up every day and work just as hard as you had before? For some reason, churches do this to missionaries all too often!

People stop supporting. For some of the reasons mentioned previously and maybe because the missionary is “out of sight, out of mind” of the donor, it is not uncommon for missionaries to lose as much as 17% of their pledged support in the first couple years they are in their field of service. When your missionary tells you what their monthly needs are, realize that their support figure should not just be the “100%” but actually closer to 120% of the stated number (trust me, no one wants to hear that!)

Because your missionary friends are passionate about being in their place of service they are willing to cut corners and live with less in order to be on the field. We all know that we can probably get by on less, but when ***financial shortfalls happen month after month and year after year it creates a stress that can be devastating in the life of a missionary.*** Too often a missionary will have to come off the field for a time to raise this additional support to address the deficient in financial health.

Unmet needs that go on month after month often force the missionary to write desperate letters pleading for the necessary resources. Having been on the field and now as part of the support team of several missionaries, I can tell you that no one likes writing those letters and no one likes reading them.

A missionary often feels guilty when they share with you all of their financial needs – the numbers are pretty overwhelming—but realize that to care well for your missionaries means being committed to their financial well-being.

Let’s also keep in mind that though financial support is what we think of first, we need to make it a priority to support our missionaries in prayer and through acts of encouragement and blessing. I know many churches divide their supported missionaries among the small groups in the church and that group takes the responsibility to remember birthdays and other special events. These gestures of kindness mean the world to your missionary!

### **3. Not all missionaries are created equal.**

You have seen this when you have had the chance to meet different missionaries. Some are gregarious and outgoing – they are easy to talk to; they don’t seem to have any trouble talking to other people. Others are quiet and less outgoing; for them support raising can be a monumental task as they are forced to be in the public eye day after day; making appointments with potential supporters and speaking in churches.

Despite the personality style of the missionary, each missionary needs your faithful support. Because there a variety of needs on the mission field, God calls a variety of people to do these jobs; the outgoing, the methodical, the mechanical, the quiet caring, the fundraiser, the teacher, the medical specialist. The world of missions is so vast that nearly any job you can imagine is a job that needs doing on the mission field for the advancement of the gospel.

Whatever the task is that God has called that person to, He has equipped them to be effective in that role. The bible translator by nature needs to be methodical, patient and able to work in relative isolation. On the other hand a church planter or evangelist or teacher may be effusive and outgoing and these traits will be a great blessing to them and to others as they do the work to which God has called them.

Treat your missionaries as individuals, seek to understand their needs and realize that whoever they are they need the financial support and prayers of churches and individuals to do the work that God has called them to.

#### 4. **There is probably a limit to what they feel comfortable sharing with you.**

I recently sat in on a missionary debriefing. This couple had been on the field for four years and several significant things happened in those four years. There is no doubt they have loving churches and committed supporters, but this debrief was the first time they had been able to tell the whole story of what had happened in those four years. They needed someone to hear their story and understand the pain of the unexpected transitions that they had encountered.

Your missionary will write and share things, usually encouraging things, because missionaries know people want to hear good news. The flip side is that your missionary can feel guilty for not having great things to say. Because they can feel that they are “getting paid to share the gospel” **they can feel a pressure to communicate** great results and great stories.

They may not want to share the struggles with language and culture, the frustrations of trying to live life in a completely different environment, the confusion it can be to just deal with the basic necessities of everyday life, the complexities of educating their kids and a million other little things. But these things are their life and they need to be free to share them. Time spent learning language and studying culture will pay huge dividends in years to come – but they have to put in the hard work now – it’s just not glamorous to write home about.

It’s not uncommon for missionaries to face issues of discouragement, frustration and depression. So much has changed in their lives and not every person adapts to change well or very quickly. Who can they talk to? **Would you be shocked to read an email from your missionary detailing the struggles of the last weeks and months?** Are you a safe person to whom they can write and share their struggles? Do you know if your missionary has anyone they can confide in? Is anyone you know checking in on them?

I recently met a missionary couple who told me that they had been on the field for six months and in that short time they realized that their dream of bible translation work was not going to happen. A variety of circumstances made it impossible for them to do the ministry for which they had trained and had told everyone they were going to do. Who could they tell? A pastor from a supporting church went to visit them; they were able to tell him what was happening and he helped them come up with a plan that allowed them to move into an area of ministry for which they were better suited. What would have happened if they had no one to talk to? What if they had been left to flounder and try to find their own way?

It is important that your missionary has someone they can talk with in confidence ... this person may not be associated with their sending mission or maybe not even their sending church. There are organizations that offer face to face on the field counseling as well as numerous people who are well qualified and can arrange counseling or debriefing sessions via Skype or other internet related means. Check in with your missionary and ask them to honestly tell you if they need to talk to someone outside of their normal circles. Ask them as well if they have the financial resources for any help they might need.

#### 5. **They are totally committed to what they are doing.**

Be an encourager to your missionary! They are doing what they feel called to do and they are doing it with all of their resources. ***They would not be on the mission field if they did not feel 100% called to what they are doing and believe that God has put them in that place.***

You need to know that your missionaries give of themselves – all the time. They give their time, their money, their own resources – to help out others. They know that the message of the gospel is shared not just in words but in their everyday actions. And through these actions they are trying to build bridges of friendship that will open the doors for gospel conversations in months and years to come.

Because they are so committed they might sacrifice family time or needed downtime and they may be tempted to neglect the daily disciplines of their time alone with God. A little secret here: because they are so committed to the task, they can sometimes feel guilty when they take time away. Encourage them that time off is normal in any job, don't neglect times of refreshment and renewal.

When you write or email them encourage them in their ministry and mission and encourage them to live in a place of balance in their lives. Pray for their spiritual vitality, their mental vitality and their emotional well being. There are several good books that address spiritual rhythms; maybe you could send them a good book on the subject or gift them an eBook download if that would be easier for them.

*The bottom line: your missionary wants you to know that they are just as human as you are, but they are seeking to do something with all their heart that God has put on their heart. And this something takes a lot of prayer, perseverance and partnership. Let your missionary friends know today that you love them and you are grateful to God for their willingness to obey His call on their lives.*