

What's Happening to the Missions Budget?

By Bruce Camp

At First Church Jim is turning over the leadership of the missions committee to Derrick. Jim is pleased that First Church supports so many wonderful missionary friends around the world, but he is afraid that the church's passion for the missions ministry is waning.

Derrick is committed to expanding First Church's global impact but he is also ready to ask some hard questions about missions funding priorities. He believes that accountability applies as much to Christian stewardship as it does to his job, and while he loves missionaries, he has nagging doubts about whether the church's funds always are being invested strategically.

Derrick's college-aged children tirelessly canvas local businesses for contributions for a homeless shelter, but yawn when faith promise offerings are solicited. This tells Derrick that the church's approach to the missions funding process must shift, too.

Jim, Derrick and First Church are hypothetical but illustrate some major changes in missions funding philosophy in many churches across North America. Here are some of the shifts that I've observed. Please note that I'm not necessarily advocating any of these spending shifts. They are presented here simply as what is occurring.

1. From financial partners to ministry partners. Churches continue to transition from supporting many missionaries at smaller amounts, to fewer missionaries at more substantial amounts. Churches want a stronger relationship and more hands-on opportunities with fewer missionaries. To accomplish that desire, they look for workers who will see the church as an active participant rather than an open wallet. Then they give these workers (sometimes considered off-site members of the church staff) more support.

2. From activity to accomplishment. Churches no longer are content to simply support activity; they want to give to people and projects accomplishing targeted objectives. These churches ask missionaries to identify their goals and require a report on outcomes. They don't expect a cross-cultural worker ministering to Muslims to plant a church as quickly as an individual working among a more responsive people. Churches are wiser than that. But they do expect the missionaries in both locations to outline a clear strategy and do all they can to achieve it.

To increase objectivity in making spending decisions, a number of churches now use a grid to determine missionary support priorities and levels.

- 3. From ministry as usual to “bang for the buck.”** Many church missions leaders want to be able to demonstrate current dramatic success in some part of their missions program in order to spur congregational giving and excitement for global outreach. While believing that the gospel must be proclaimed in resistant areas, they also value responsiveness. Numbers do matter.
- 4. From lifetime support to time-delineated support.** The issues we’ve already mentioned above have resulted in some missionaries being dropped from some churches’ missions budgets. “Disengagement” occurs for other reasons as well: missionaries change roles, fail to communicate, do not spend significant time at the church while on home assignment, etc. Rather than terminate what was often assumed to be a life-time commitment, churches are now defining support for a term of service (cf. five years) and then reevaluating. Churches are drawing up contracts with supported missionaries, pledging what they will do for missionaries, and outlining what they expect from them and their agencies.
- 5. From arbitrary support to alignment with strategy.** Missions leadership teams are asking what the church is trying to accomplish in missions. After they define their strategy, they align their budget with that strategy. Churches’ strategies are often strongly influenced by the passions of the pastoral team and can shift with new leaders. The resulting impact on support can leave missionaries feeling that they are subject to the whims of shifting policy.
- 6. From nominal project investment to significant investment in a strategic focus.** An increasing number of churches are choosing to focus on a particular area of the world by adopting defined objectives for making a noteworthy difference in that location. In order to reach that goal, they substantially increase the amount of funds invested in that initiative.
- 7. From cross-cultural missionary support only to inclusion of support of nationals.** Western funding of two-thirds world evangelists, church planters and Bible translators continues to increase. Church missions leaders realize that God is raising up non-Westerners to play an increasing role in global evangelization.
- 8. From funding missionary support exclusively to funding of missionaries, projects and church mobilization.** Many churches traditionally have given almost 100% of their missions budget to the support of individual missionaries. Now many spend up to two-thirds of their budget on ministry projects and the mobilization of their church through short-term trips, missions education and administration.
- 9. From a foreign concentration to a balance of overseas, local cross-cultural, and community outreach.** Support for ministries overseas no longer is viewed as the highest priority. Increasingly churches’ budgets are more “glocal”, reflecting a both/and responsibility to reach out cross-culturally at home as well as abroad. More and more dollars are being spent on meeting the spiritual and physical needs in the local community. Meanwhile, some ethnic churches are achieving a more balanced approach by complementing their historic concentration on community outreach (cf. a Chinese church seeking to reach Chinese people locally and globally) with a renewed emphasis on reaching the ends of the earth.
- 10. From denominational channels to individual workers and projects.** For decades the majority of denominational churches funneled all of their missions dollars through their headquarters. But church leaders recognize the need for the

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personal involvement of their congregation and are adopting more missionaries and projects they know personally and can get involved with directly.

- II. From faith promise to creative funding approaches.** Where faith promise funding has in the past been encouraged as a contribution to a large, impersonal missions budget, some churches are now challenging their people to select from a slate of church-adopted missionaries/projects, and to designate their giving accordingly. Others have begun foundations or endowments to which people can donate. Still others initiate fundraising activities for missions such as golf outings, or launch businesses such as bookstores or second-hand clothing stores, with the profits designated exclusively for missions.

One thing is clear: how local churches raise and distribute their world missions dollars is changing and will continue to change as new generations shoulder the responsibility to fund the church's priority task. The desire for good stewardship, relationship and accomplishment are the drivers. May we use our talents wisely!

Bruce Camp has served as a missions consultant with the Evangelical Free Church of America denomination, and now leads DualReach (www.dualreach.org), an organization that mobilizes both churches and mission agencies for more effective missions involvement. Email Bruce at bruce@dualreach.org.