

Guidelines for Overseas Missions

Many churches want more of their outreach giving to go to specific, designated causes instead of denominational “catch-all” general funds. The support of overseas missionaries is a particularly strong concern for evangelical churches. Mission giving is important. It is also important for churches to carefully think through their approach to mission giving before they make major decisions.

This essay is meant to help pastors, elders, mission committees and congregations make decisions about outreach giving that will bless both the congregation and the Kingdom of God. Though the focus of this brochure is on overseas missions, the principles apply to other outreach as well.

WHERE DO WE START?

Too often churches begin by listing every cause under the sun and trying to find a way to do a little bit for each one. Unless you have a huge mission budget, this tends to dissipate the value of your giving. You can give so many directions that no one is really helped much. I suggest that a local church try to limit the number of mission causes they support in order to maximize the effect of their giving. This allows missionaries to build strong relationships with a limited number of churches and makes better use of their time for visiting churches.

At other times, the issue of missionary support arises when someone approaches the church to ask for mission support. While this can be a path of God’s leading, it is not best to simply assume the first person who asks is the one God is calling your church to support.

A better way to begin is to ask, “What does this congregation believe about missions? What particular passions for ministry beyond the local church resonate with the people God has placed in this congregation?” God often places a few very strong mission concerns in the hearts of the people in a church. Those concerns often point the direction of God’s leading.

This question can create problems, as you can probably find strong advocates for more causes than you could possibly fund. Don't focus on listing every individual interest. Instead, look for interests, passions and concerns that are reflected in the church as a whole, and particularly in the church's leadership.

When you know what kind of mission you want to support, then you can go about the business of finding those individuals or groups to which God is directing you.

SETTING STANDARDS

Not every missionary or group is worthy of our support. Christian stewardship requires us to ask pointed questions about the missions we support. In general I recommend the following guidelines for any mission receiving church support:

- The missionary must be accountable to a board that actively and rigorously oversees his or her mission work. It is generally a mistake to support lone-ranger missionaries or those whose mission board just sends funds along without careful oversight.

- Mission boards should belong to the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability or an equivalent accountability ministry. If they don't belong to an accountability ministry, they should have some very compelling reasons for their decision, and should carefully account for their funds to their supporters. Overseas mission work is vulnerable to fraud and misuse of funds by its very nature. Generally, a mission that cannot meet the standards of a financial accountability ministry is not being realistic about potential abuses, even if it is led by wonderful people.

- The group or missionary must operate with a clearly defined philosophy of missions. For most this will include a goal of evangelism and leader development that eventually results in a self-supporting indigenous church.

- The mission board must have a responsible system for assuring the missionary and his/her family have coverage for medical and emergency needs, retirement, etc. Operating in faith does not mean being irresponsible to family.