

Advocate Teams: The Local Church Caring for Missionaries

By **NATHAN SLOAN**

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It was 2008 and I had just finished my first term as a cross-cultural missionary in Nepal. It had been a wonderful season of life and ministry. Alongside the grueling work of language learning, I was discipling young men in the faith, I met my wife and I was personally growing in faith and maturity. That last part, the part about personal growth, was the most painful part. You see, I had been well trained, I had a good team on the field, but no one prepared me for the personal struggles I would face as I crossed cultures. I came head-to-head with significant inner struggles of loneliness, selfishness and ethnocentrism. These, along with other struggles and sins, reared their ugly head in my heart and too often came out in the way I treated others. What I know now that I didn't know then, is that doing cross-cultural missions work is like pouring Miracle Gro on your sins. Mixed in with the good days were days of darkness and deep inner struggle. Thankfully, I had a solid team along with good missionary and Nepali friends who pressed in and journeyed with me. But do you know what I didn't have? I didn't have a sending church who knew how to care for me or be present with me in the struggle. Don't hear me wrong. I came from a good church with wonderful people, but they had no idea that missionary care and encouragement could and should be provided by the local church. Let's not make the same mistake my local church did.

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Local churches are primed to be a place of encouragement, care, and even correction for people serving cross-culturally.

Gary Strauss and Kelly Narramore write that “much of the responsibility for the preparation and spiritual and emotional support of missionaries has been assumed to be the domain of the mission agency...It is imperative that the local church play a larger role in world missions, particularly in the care and development of missionaries that they send out.” This kind of deep ownership in global missions begins with good discipleship and leads to thoughtful pre-field missionary assessment and

development in the local church. It also leads to intentional missionary care.

But missionary care doesn't just happen. Churches and church leaders would be wise to develop systems and structures that allow for their local church, both leaders and the average member, to care for their cross-cultural sent ones. There are several models of missionary support, care and advocacy that can be implemented in a local church. By far the most popular, and maybe the most effective, is the concept of the advocate team.

Advocate Teams

In the 1980s, Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota created the concept of the Barnabas Team. These are teams of 6–12 church members focused on providing care and encouragement to missionaries sent out from their local church. Each Barnabas Team seeks to meet practical needs while also being a place where missionaries can be open and honest with their needs and struggles. More than 20 years later, churches like Austin Stone and Sojourn Church Midtown took these foundational ideas and created advocate teams, an evolution of the early Barnabas Team. The development of missionary care in the local church has continued with a variety of models that fit churches of different contexts and capacities.

If you're looking to develop an advocate team model in your local church, here are some helpful principles to consider.



What Does an Advocate Team Do?

There are two major roles of an advocate team—care and representation. Advocate teams should provide ongoing presence and intentional care to their missionary as well as be a voice for them to the church as a whole and to church leaders.

Care

Many missionaries live in physically and emotionally challenging environments. Some are raising children far from extended family. Others struggle with cultural adjustments and language barriers. Most significantly, all serve on the front lines of spiritual warfare. For survival and spiritual health, missionaries need the assurance that they are not forgotten, that others in the body of Christ love them and are committed to their welfare as well as to the success of their ministry. Missionaries need empathetic listeners—compassionate, caring friends who are not in a supervisory role but willingly pursue them and their family. An advocate team can provide this kind of spiritual, relational, and emotional care.

A word of caution here. Advocate teams are not intended to be professional counselors. Advocate teams provide proactive care and encouragement. Often missionaries will still need counselors and pastors to provide deep care and counseling as they face hardship and trauma in life and ministry.

Walking alongside missionaries also involves identifying specific needs which the team can meet or organize others in their church to meet. These could include departure tasks, stateside time, tax preparation, housing and any number of practical needs.

Representation

Advocate teams should also be champions for the missionary and his or her work to the church body and to church leaders. Because advocate teams are often talking regularly with their missionary, they will know real time information they can pass on to others for prayer, encouragement and intervention when needed.



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What Does an Advocate Team Look Like?

Ideally, the structure of an advocate team should be simple. The foundation of each advocate team is the team leader. He or she is the one who has the main connection with the missionary and leads the team toward healthy care and representation. The team leader either already knows the missionary well or commits to build a deep relationship with them. The rest of the team is built under the leadership of this committed team leader. Other team members could have specific responsibilities that define their role. These responsibilities could include communication, prayer, practical service, care packages and more.

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For some churches and missionaries, having just one person serve as an advocate is a more practical option. The single model advocate allows mission leaders to more easily hold people accountable which creates more stability over time. For other church leaders

and missionaries, they find success in building teams around committed leaders which allows greater involvement from members, a growing number of people engaged in global missions, and more people praying on a regular basis.

So, whether your church adopts the team model or the leader-only model, make sure to define what you expect from advocates in writing, provide training and encouragement on a regular basis, and hold people accountable to follow through with their commitment to serve.

What Does an Advocate Team Do?

The following are some suggestions on what advocate teams can do to provide care and representation to missionaries.

Meet Regularly

Teams can meet at anytime and anywhere, just ask your teams to set a time and meet regularly to fulfill their role as advocates. Many churches find that meeting monthly is a good rhythm. But I've also talked with churches who meet quarterly or even weekly to pray and support their missionaries.

Pray

One of the main roles of an advocate team is to pray for their missionary on a regular basis, both as a group and individually. This means that missionaries will need to provide regular prayer needs to the team. I've found that this can be a struggle for some missionaries. The accountability the advocate team provides the missionary in this way is a good and needed aspect of the advocate relationship. If missionaries want to be prayed for, they need to communicate regularly.

Stay Connected

Ask most missionaries and they will tell you that it is a struggle to stay connected with their friends and church family back home. Part of providing care to missionaries is the commitment to stay connected. I would encourage advocate teams to communicate to their missionaries at a minimum

of once a month. In today's technological world, communication is much easier and more frequent than ever before. Consider adopting channels of communicating that your missionaries already use and would want to communicate through. Communication tools like iMessage, What's App, Signal, Zoom, Slack and others are good things to consider. Start by asking your missionary what communication channels they prefer and what they desire communication to look like.

Also, be sensitive to missionaries' security needs. We live in a rapidly changing world. More and more people are realizing the dangers of communication, social media and unfiltered language surrounding missionary work. Make sure and ask your missionaries what security measures they are taking and what policies they would want you to adopt.

Send Care Packages and Handwritten Letters

Nothing says I love you to a missionary quite like a handwritten letter or box full of things from their home culture. Advocate teams should consider pooling resources to send care packages, write letters and find ways to practically bless missionaries—especially missionary kids. Make sure to ask your missionaries what things they enjoy and how best to mail items to them.

Help with Departure and Arrival

Some of the hardest times for your missionary will be preparing to leave for the field and returning home for a visit or to resettle back in the States. Whether your missionary is headed to the field or headed back to your community, there are countless things that need to be done. I've found that missionaries are hesitant to ask for help and may not even know what they need themselves. Take the initiative and find ways to jump in to serve your missionary. These can include helping to clean their home, watching their kids while they pack, hosting a going away party, lending a car, paying for counseling, stocking their fridge with food, providing a listening ear and more. The best thing you can do in these moments is to show up, offer your presence and meet the needs you see.



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One Final Thought

Adopting an advocate or care structure in your church will be extremely helpful. However, systems and structures only go so far. Missionary care and support structures must be rooted in relationship and be held accountable by leadership. These models won't work unless we invite people in, train them well, and then hold them accountable to be relationally present with people over the long haul. Too often the old adage is true, "out of sight, out of mind." By creating, implementing and maintaining healthy systems of advocacy and missionary care, we are committing to not only send missionaries, but to stay with them, to fight for them and to love them on a consistent basis.

So, what are you waiting for? Take time to talk through the principles, talking with other churches who do these things well and then jump in and start doing the work of advocacy. Will you make mistakes? Probably. Will your sent ones feel loved and empowered for better ministry? Absolutely! ❏