

Mission Agencies: How Do I Choose One?

By James Rutz

There are hundreds of Protestant missionary-sending agencies in North America. They range from huge to tiny, well-established to new, and excellent to not-so-excellent. Most of them have impressive publicity and representatives. How can one choose? Here are some areas you might want to explore, and questions to ask.

Church Ties

The first place to look is with agencies that are closely linked with your local church. If you don't know who these are, ask your pastor. If you go with an agency that is closely lined with your local church, you are likely to find similar theology and background and you are likely to receive more financial support from your local church. There are, however, some additional considerations – especially if your church cooperates with a wide range of agencies. As an alternative to setting out fleeces, flipping coins, or reading tea leaves, here is a basic check list of criteria for choosing an agency.

Statement of Faith

Although most non-denominational agencies are conservative, they are not highly detailed in their doctrinal statements. Because of this you will have little trouble agreeing with them on the basics if your theology is conservative. Further, you may be surprised to find that some denominations with liberal membership have a missionary force that is quite conservative.

Countries

Most missionary candidates have some feelings of preference for a certain area or type of subculture. But try not to be overly rigid, because many agencies will want to make strong suggestions concerning your location. Long experience shows that God often speaks to a candidate through an agency!

Track Record

How well is the agency doing? What has been its impact on the field? Has the work grown, especially in the last two years? Even though work is very slow in some countries, an agency should have something to point to.

Size

On the positive side, a small agency has the advantages of a friendly, informal family. A large agency has the fringe benefits of a solid, sophisticated organization. On the negative side, the sloppy methods of some small agencies have helped to keep them small for decades. And the bureaucratic efficiency of some large agencies could give you that lost feeling of being merely a cog in a big machine.

Importance

How needed is the agency? What would happen to the progress of world evangelization if it disappeared? Just how much is riding on its success? Remember that some of the less dramatic types of work, such as teaching missionary children, may be in the background, but are nonetheless essential.

Management

Is the agency moving in a clear direction? Do the directors actually help their people? It's difficult to tell from publicity material alone. A dedicated field staff with all eyes on the Lord may stumble and flounder from one huge success to another for years, even though supervisory support is erratic.

Type of Work

Does the ministry actually need you? If you feel you should get into one particular type of work, make sure they want people in that line now! If you're more flexible, no problem.

Leadership

Who are the leaders, the guiding lights? How long have they been with the organization? What is their reputation in the church? Don't be bashful about asking people from other organizations about their leadership; you aren't digging up dirt, you're doing your homework wisely.

Organization

Is the organizational leadership appointed? Elected? Is the whole show run by one man? Is it run as an oligarchy by one family? Some small agencies are. And are they authoritarian, democratic, or somewhere in-between? Is the individual missionary's voice heard in policy discussions? What is their attitude toward women?

Origin

How and when did they get their start? As a natural outgrowth of the ministry of one person or small group? As a splinter from another agency? As a new outreach from an established organization?

Standards

What qualities and qualifications must you have as a candidate? Does the ministry provide or require special training? The best thing is to seek an agency in which you meet all their qualifications without being overly qualified.

Turnover

How many years does the average missionary stay on? And where do they go after they leave – into some other notable work or into thin air? Why did they leave? Ask agencies what the common reasons are for leaving their particular agency.

Mission Issues

Personnel Sources

Where do the candidates come from? One denomination? Several countries? The white-collar culture? If you were raised in the Oakland ghetto, you may be broadened by working alongside ex-farmhands from Missouri, but be prepared for a few adjustments.

Finances

What if you're in the upper Amazon valley and your support drops off one month? Or if you get 100% of your support this month and your co-worker down the river gets only 50%, in your pay checks do you both receive 75% or do you each get what came in specifically for each? Is this agency's financial policy sound? Is it open to the public? Are their contributions solidly behind them with a high per-person support figure? How much of your personal support will go toward the agency's overhead? If their overhead expense is greater than a quarter of the total budget, find out why.

Style

Finally, there is that indefinable business of feel. Are these your kind of people? If not, do you like them anyway? Are you comfortable with them? Find out about the styles of relating among the agencies' staff members. How are their missionaries on the field or on furlough cared for? Are they cared for, and if so, how well? Talk to the missionaries on furlough. Write to one of their missionaries in your country of interest. Visit the field if you can. It's worth the effort; it's like picking out a new family.

Don't ever let yourself get bogged down in the details of choosing an organization. Remember, if God has clearly led you to go overseas as a missionary, then someone is waiting for you. God will show you where you are to serve Him.

James Rutz served on the staff of Caleb Project in the 1980s.

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