



## ***Member Care Update***

**Ethnê-MC Facilitation Team**

To contact us: [membercare@ethne.net](mailto:membercare@ethne.net)

---

### ***Ethnê-MC Update Issue 26: March 2011***

---

This month, Dr. Brent Lindquist continues our discussion about the responsibility Churches and Mission Agencies share in caring for missionaries. The topic is complex, but worthy of our careful thought and discussion. We invite your input as we strive to grow effective care for missionaries.

## **Addressing the Opportunities and Challenges for Missions and Churches to Care for Missionaries**

Dr. Brent Lindquist

Over the course of my career in member care and now member health, I have noticed a lot missionaries and member care workers perceive that their organization refuses to care for its staff like it should. I, as a longtime leader and clinician in the member care field, have seen this perspective and the view from management's side.

As a clinician, I can see there are times when missionaries do not feel valued by their organizations. As a leader, I understand there are many circumstances and situations which I must be aware of and operate under that cause me to look as if I'm uncaring. I have also witnessed positives and negatives, help and confusion once sending churches become involved in member care.

Organizations are being asked why they don't care more for their missionaries and who is responsible for their care. The questions imply blame and cause defensiveness. I would like to ask that we move beyond this standoff and look at a different perspective.

This spring, I am being asked to consult with local churches who want to enhance their member care programs for their missionaries at a member care conference in the Northwest. To prepare for this assignment, I have been asking missions and member care resource people how the local church interfaces with their organizational approaches to member care. A number of trends are becoming apparent.

First of all, there is a strong desire on the part of all parties to work together. At the same time, there is a feeling that too frequently none of parties communicate well with the others. Misunderstandings and miscommunications tend to flavor the respect they have for each other.

I keep hearing and reading how important the local church is in terms of taking care of a missionary. I understand that. But, we need to ask, which local church? The missionaries home/sending church? All the churches that support missionaries? The one who supports the most? Here's my, perhaps a little

skeptical, observation. The ownership a church feels about a missionary is in inverse relationship to the amount of support they give. Sometimes, a church that supports a missionary in a small amount, demands an extraordinary amount of input and feedback and that can be very frustrating and time consuming for the mission organization. Conversely, I also see mission organizations not always involving the local church where and when they could.

There are some realities that I think we all need to pay attention to because, no matter how good our intentions, certain things will not be accomplished. For example, on the organization side, there are rules, laws, regulations, and what have you that determine how an organization is able to communicate with a non-employee. There are many regulations that prevent communication if the employee, or missionary, has not given permission for that communication. A relatively easy way to address this is to have some form of communication permission and documentation from the beginning of a missionary's career. That way, the organization can know how it can communicate with supporters and churches. I could go on and on about communication issues, but suffice it to say, for the purposes of this discussion, talking through things and agreeing on how and what things will be communicated will prevent potential problems later on.

Next, I would like to talk about responsibility. Who is ultimately responsible for the missionary upon acceptance into the mission organization? Or, when they receive an assignment to the field? Too often I see both missionaries and local churches not understanding the responsibilities that the mission board has assumed on the missionary's behalf at this point. In many cases, the mission board is responsible for helping the missionary gather support, managing the funds dispersal, helping with medical benefits, and developing policies and procedures for safety on the field. This is beyond the reach of most churches. Areas of responsibility can be spelled out clearly in the beginning stages of the missionary career. This will avoid misunderstandings later on.

Missionaries can inadvertently create problems with communication and responsibility when they start telling the church one thing and the organization another thing. Church and agency may be in the dark about important information. The tragic result for all concerned, especially when dealing with hurt and pain, is that fear of what "might happen" may drive people to start keeping secrets from each other. In the end, that helps no one.

In conclusion, I would like to put forth the opportunity to continue dialoguing about these important issues. I see member care and member health as a community endeavor, achieved by equal participation according to needs, skills and requirements by all parties.

I'd also like to say that we need to develop a more positive metaphor in talking about relationships between organizations and missionaries and churches. Rather than identifying the times when things don't work right, can we instead focus on ensuring that good strategies and policies are followed well? The task is too important to take a deconstructive approach.

I would appreciate hearing your thoughts and input on this matter.

**Some questions for us to consider:**

How do you see the relationships between mission organizations and churches functioning? Do you know of good examples where this is working well?

How would a mission handle the different levels of interest in caring for the missionary if the missionary comes with several churches that hold differing priorities?

How do you think mission organizations could better educate churches to the needs of their missionaries?

What steps to healthy partnerships do you see?

To continue this discussion, please email Brent at [BrentLindquist@linkcare.org](mailto:BrentLindquist@linkcare.org).