

Why Should I Join a Mission Agency?

By Jeff Boesel

I was recently asked by a candidate, strongly considering cross-cultural work somewhere, for the reasons why someone would join an agency. I was, to a certain extent, caught off guard because, having grown up in an agency and now being part of, and even recruiting for, an agency it seems second nature. Why wouldn't you want to be part of our great family?? However, as I let that settle in to my prejudices I realized that this question is not only pivotal for many, but foundational as well. Of course you should ask yourself that question. For what it is worth, here is my honest answer.

There are many good reasons to join an agency, but not all of them apply to everyone. There are also a couple reasons, depending on the agency, which I would consider "bad" reasons to pursue an agency. I will close the article with those thoughts. Most of what an agency offers the missionary revolves around the area of support, in one way or another. I think you will see what I mean as we proceed.

1) An agency can provide emotional support. Just living in another culture can be one of the hardest things someone can do, not to mention trying to minister there. Having someone from a supportive team there to hold your hand when you need it can make the difference between success and disaster.

2) An agency can provide spiritual support. When you are in this different culture, initially at least, you will feel like you have entered a box into which God cannot reach. This isn't true, of course, but cross-cultural stress and the lack of language ability puts you in a place of deep lack in the area of spiritual support. Having some people around who speak, think and worship like you can make the difference.

3) An agency can provide safety. When you first get to a country you really have no idea who to trust or how to go about what God is asking you to do, even if you already speak the language. It is easy to get influenced by people who are not moving in your direction because they seem to be helpful. They may, very well, not be. Many people will call themselves Christians who have no idea what that means to you. You will think that they are like you but you will be wrong. There is actually a joke in Guatemala about a guy who gets kidnapped and in conversation with his kidnapper mentions that he is a Christian. The kidnapper responds, "That's great. So am I." You see, being a "Christian" in Guatemala can basically mean that you are not a Catholic. So, the agency team in your new country, if there is one, can be your "Wikipedia" of local knowledge and keep you out of the potholes that, for sure, are there whether you see them or not.

4) An agency can provide platform for initial ministry opportunities. Trying to actually do something significant can be a real challenge at first. It takes, literally, years to establish relationships that lead to greater Kingdom things - longer in more closed contexts. If you are with an agency, though, you can begin with the platform that they have already established and build on their relationships...not that you won't also create and grow some of your own along the way. It just makes your effort there more effective from the beginning.

5) An agency can provide accountability. This accountability is necessary in two main arenas. First, it provides a confidence that gives some peace to your donors. Your church may need this too. Knowing how money is spent is important to some people and definitely to the IRS. If you are not part of a nonprofit agency you cannot give people a tax deduction for their financial support (though your sending church might) and you have to be responsible to keep records and justify the use of the funds to the IRS. If you are part of an agency, they stand between you and the IRS, assuring them that the money is being spent appropriately and you don't have to worry. Secondly, an agency provides accountability to keep you from getting off track. Often we think an idea is great and will pursue it until trusted spiritual advisors say it is not wise. That wisdom often comes from the experience the agency team has already gained while living and working in the culture. Many a well-meaning missionary has crashed and burned pursuing a plan that would never had been attempted if they had followed the wise counsel of the seasoned veterans in their agency.

6) An agency can provide logistical support. So much of your energy in living and working in another country is spent on just that, living and working. You will find very little time for even keeping up with a blog, or other correspondence with your support team, much less for keeping your visa current, banking, reporting to supporting churches etc. The agency can (not all do) help by maintaining your mailing list, publishing prayer letters, receipting your donations etc. This may be one of the most clearly apparent reasons for being part of an agency. For years we worked at a Missionary Kid (MK) school in Guatemala and saw many independent missionaries struggle month after month just trying to respond to their support teams. All we had to do was send an email to our HQ and the rest they did as a service to us.

7) An agency can provide Membercare. This is something you don't think you will need until you need it. If things are crashing and burning around you...and believe me, there will be times when you think they are...it is an assurance to know that your agency has your back and will go to bat for you and care for you. I was sitting in a conference once where the mission pastor of a large church was explaining how well their plan was going to send and support their own missionaries. There was, apparently, no real need for us pesky agency types. But he closed with an interesting comment saying, "Now, if you are out there with some of our missionaries and they need help, we hope that you will come alongside them in the love of Christ to meet their needs." He knew there was a big hole in their plan and they were wanting to trust the agencies to be the care people he was not willing to pay for. Of course, we would step in the gap when needed but that could be avoided if Membercare was part of the plan originally.

There are many more reasons, like financial security, retirement planning, good medical coverage globally, emergency extraction plans and funds, opportunity for personal development and training for new growth areas. But still, agencies are not the best choice for everyone and there are some downsides you should be aware of in considering joining one.

1) Agencies tend to be slow in making decisions. Some allow missionaries to make ministry decisions on the field and that helps (like ours) but, in general, it seems like trying to turn a battleship.

2) Agencies are expensive. All of the services an agency provides do not come without a cost. If you compare the costs of various agencies and the services they provide there is usually a one to one correlation with cost v service. It would be so much cheaper to just go it alone. I should warn you, though, that many missionaries that try the cheaper road end up regretting it and joining agencies later.

3) Agencies have personalities. Make sure, if you join one, that you join an agency which has a personality to match yours. It is like choosing a college, sort of. You are going to be "living" with this agency for the next so many years and you don't want to be attached to one which is constantly causing you pain and discomfort.

4) Agencies can, and often do, make mistakes. Hey, an agency is just a family of flawed people. We do our best, but even the best of us get it wrong from time to time. Go into this with grace and patience.

5) An agency may restrict your freedom to minister as you feel God is leading you. We are required to define ourselves for IRS purposes and in our accounting we must show that the money given to us and receipted goes to support ministries within our definition. In addition to that you may get a team leader that questions your ideas, goals and motives. Those can be hard days.

6) An agency will require that you think beyond yourself and your ministry. Seems like it may be a good thing but if you are a pioneer type and feel God has you on a course out there alone, an agency would be a constant source of irritation.

I hope this helps some of you who are wondering about the value of being with an agency. May God bless you as you seek to follow him in obedience, wherever he is leading you.