

Gaining and Retaining Supporters

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Introduction: Some would-be missionaries so fear deputation (raising support) that they either hesitate or refuse to answer what they know is God's call on their lives. In actuality, the process of raising support is faith building, both for you and for your supporters. Through it God will give you lifelong friends whose fellowship equals or surpasses (at times) that of blood relatives. Here are some biblical and practical thoughts for helping you gain and retain supporters.

1. Work through (biblically and practically) the issue of asking for support.

- a. Merriam-Webster's online dictionary defines deputation as "the act of appointing a deputy" and "a group of people appointed to represent others." It defines deputy as "a person appointed as a substitute with power to act." Deputation is asking churches to deputize you to act on their behalf in order to reach the people where God has called you.
- b. It is not wrong to ask fellow believers for financial help. Paul asked the churches he started to contribute to the relief funds he was raising for the Jews in Jerusalem. Approaches to asking have differed among believers (e.g., George Muller, J. Hudson Taylor, and D. L. Moody).
- c. Personally, we tended to be reticent to ask for personal needs but were more willing to ask for ministry needs (e.g., BJMBC building). We would mention our support percentage but hardly ever anything specific beyond that.
- d. It is important that you come to a persuasion along these lines: While it is not wrong to ask, you do *not need* to ask people in order for God to provide for your needs. God can move people to help you by your bringing your requests to Him only.

2. Have the full support of your home (or sending) church.

- a. Paul prioritized checking in with the church at Antioch, the church that functioned as his sending church. After his first missionary journey, he reported to them and spent time with them (Acts 14:26-28). He traveled from Jerusalem to Antioch at the conclusion of his second missionary journey (Acts 18:22). We can probably assume he would have returned to Antioch after his third missionary journey if he had not been arrested in Jerusalem.
- b. We have no indication whether "Antioch Baptist" supported him financially. My assumption is that they did not regularly support him since he tells the Philippian church that no other church fellowshiped with him in the matter of giving except them (Philippians 4:15).
- c. While Acts does not provide a prescription for how to do missions, it does provide an inspired description and thus a valuable prototype and pattern. Based on Paul's relationship with the church at Antioch, a home or sending church ought to be one in which you have served or are ministering. It is a place where you have exercised your gifts, and they have sensed, with you, God's call on your life for missionary service.
- d. Your sending church may or may not be your biggest financial supporter. Even a smaller church can provide ongoing accountability, fellowship, prayer support, and ministry opportunities (when you are home). *Do not choose a home church primarily based on its ability to assist you financially.* You may need far more important support than money before your missionary tenure is done!

- e. Taking Antioch as our paradigm, a good sending church is a church that has been planted by sound evangelistic believers, has received confirmation from like-minded congregations, has been edified to the point where its members are identifiably Christian (even in the world's eyes), and has leaders who are leading the way in ministry and in prayer. I summarize these characteristics as evangelistically oriented, doctrinally orthodox, biblically edified, and Spirit led. When a church like this recognizes that the Holy Spirit is singling you out for a special task, you have a gold mine!
- f. The first step toward missions for some might be linking up with a church of this kind.

3. Value the “fellowship” of supporting churches and individuals.

Paul valued the “fellowship” of the Philippian church, which is perhaps the best biblical example of a supporting church.

- a. How did the Philippian church help? They were the first church to partner with him financially (Philippians 4:15). They contributed to his ministry on multiple occasions (Philippians 4:16). They contributed to his ministry even after he departed from their province (Philippians 4:15). Their support seems to have enabled Paul to devote himself more fully to ministering the Word of God (Acts 18:5; 2 Corinthians 11:8–9; Philippians 4:15–16). They sent one of their own (Epaphroditus) to assist Paul.
- b. Why did the Philippian church help? The church enjoyed a unique relationship with Paul as the one who had planted their church.
- c. Application: Your best supporting churches (or individuals) will most likely be those with whom and to whom you have ministered. These (like your sending church) are those who have personally seen your spiritual gifting and Christlike commitment and are, therefore, convinced that supporting you in missionary service is a good investment.
- d. How does Paul communicate with them? Paul stays in contact with them through correspondence, through sending messengers, and through personal visits. His correspondence is both warm and exhortative.
- e. How does Paul view their support of him? Paul views their support as “fellowship.” He simultaneously admits a genuine need, thanks them for their help, and expresses contentment in any circumstance. Their help is a blessing, but Paul would be content with or without it! Their giving has caused him to *rejoice in the Lord*. Paul ends his discussion of their help to him with a prayer wish that God would be glorified!
- f. Application: We should want God to be glorified even when it comes to money matters—in the way we ask for, receive, and express gratitude! Your financial communications with your supporters should contain the following elements (not necessarily all in every communication): gratefulness for help, contentment with any situation, and admission of real need without overly exaggerating or dwelling on it. It does help people to glorify God in their giving when they discover that their giving met a real need!

4. Gratefully accept “support” from unexpected quarters.

- a. Supporters can sometimes be those whom you do not know, but the Lord uses them to send you on your way (3 John 5–8). *One of deputation’s blessings is the way God uses Christian strangers to meet your needs.*
- b. The Apostle John heartily commends such people as fellow workers for the truth.
- c. We also, by the way, as missionaries ought to be those who “return the favor,” sending others forward on their way as we have opportunity.

5. Consider these practical tips for gaining and retaining supporters.

- a. For gaining supporters—
 - i. View deputation as pre-field ministry. Seek to *minister*; let God raise up supporters.
 - ii. Be a missionary while on deputation.
 - iii. Be excited about your ministry and let your excitement show—*joyful* is a GFA core value.
 - iv. As you present at churches or with individuals, communicate a specific call and a specific plan. Consider laying out five- or ten-year goals.
 - v. A survey trip to your field is not a waste of time or money; it may be what you need to add excitement or credibility to your ministry presentations.
 - vi. Accept whatever support, accommodations, etc., come your way. Don't ask for minimums.
 - vii. Begin deputation by first contacting churches and people who know you! Then seek additional contacts through them or through GFA. For example, if you have a pastor friend in a city with whom you have a meeting scheduled, ask if he has any fellowshiping pastors near him whom he thinks might be interested in your ministry. Ask GFA if they know of any churches in the area.
 - viii. Look at church websites (or social media) to discern affiliations, worship style, or direction. In doing so, you may uncover a gem of a church that you or GFA has known nothing about! Conversely, you may discover that the church would not be a good fit for you! You do not need the support of those who will not be on board with your philosophy of ministry!
 - ix. Schedule ahead if possible. Bigger churches with missions conferences will often book over a year in advance. Once you secure a meeting in a given area, work to book other meetings nearby.
 - x. Accept whatever support or provision comes your way (Matthew 10:11–13), and express gratitude.
 - xi. Build genuine relationships with both the pastor(s) and the people. We have found that the pastor is the key to being supported by the church, but the people are often those with whom you will enjoy lasting relationships. Pastors come and go.
 - xii. Look for like-minded individuals who could perhaps be a part of your mission team in the present or future. God may use you not just to gain support but to acquire a teammate!
 - xiii. Genuinely value prayer support. William Carey and his fellowshiping ministers did! John Ryland: “Our undertaking to India really appeared to me, on its commencement, to be somewhat like a few men, who were deliberating about the importance of penetrating into a deep mine which had never before been explored. We had no one to guide us; and while we were thus deliberating, Carey, as it were, said ‘Well, I will go down if you will hold the rope.’ But before he went down . . . he, as it seemed to me, took an oath from each of us, at the mouth of the pit, to this effect — that ‘while we lived, we should never let go of the rope.’”

- b. For retaining supporters—
- i. Live within your means so that churches do not have to fund any lack of discipline on your part. For example, “prayer” for furlough travel expenses may come across as irresponsible. Consider saving honorariums from one furlough to cover the travel expenses for the next.
 - ii. Be diligent about communicating with and praying for your supporters (they need your prayers also). *Fellowship with them!*
 - iii. Schedule furlough meetings in advance. This helps your supporting churches plan; it also helps reduce your travels. We have a saying in Tagalog—*parang lagari* (like a saw going back and forth)—unnecessary travel duplication is probably not how you should spend your furlough!
 - iv. Find ways to give back—even if small.
 - v. Truly enjoy visiting your churches. Sure! God has called you to be a missionary to a specific place and people, but you should be glad to be a missionary wherever you are.
 - vi. Share burdens as well as joys. Be as real as is appropriate.
 - vii. Send out regular updates.
 - viii. As you travel, be careful about expecting or hinting at missionary discounts. We work for a generous God; let’s act like it. On paper, my income may not seem large, but I have a Heavenly Father Who is incredibly good at paying my bills.
 - ix. Balance giving freely (Matthew 10:8) with the knowledge that the *laborer* is worthy of his support (Matthew 10:10). In other words, be willing to be spent for the sake of the Gospel with little or no financial return, but gratefully accept those who desire to meet your material needs. Play the cultural game correctly 😊, but don’t exhibit a false humility or a faked reluctance.
 - x. Communicate your *joy in God* for their generosity to you! Let them “feel” the vertical dimension in the horizontal act of giving! Giving to you is not primarily about meeting your need or ensuring greater provision for them; it is about glorifying God!
 - xi. At the same time, communicate the blessing they are to you. Let them know, if it is apropos, how the Lord used their gift to meet a specific need.