

# Five Opportunities for Organizations to Support Missionary Well-Being through COVID-19

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Caring for the well-being of missionaries is not just the role of Member Care—it's about the very real work that you as organizational leaders and home office teams are providing day in and day out. What you do and don't do as an organization has very real implications for the mental health of missionaries. This is especially true now.

Covid-19 has brought on a series of losses, but, as is true of any transition, it has also brought possibilities. Leaning into the paradox, this time can become a season of organizational learning and trying new things or re-shaping or re-infusing meaning into things you are already doing. Since every organization has its own culture, capacities and priorities, I offer the following five opportunities as a starting point for your own thinking as you seek to support the well-being of missionaries throughout the Covid-19 crisis:

Opportunity 1. Provide Stability through Continuity of Services

Opportunity 2. Reduce Isolation by Facilitating Belonging

Opportunity 3. Create Safety by Addressing the Real Challenges of this  
Time Together

Opportunity 4. Facilitate Care by Supporting Immediate Supervisors

Opportunity 5. Ease Anxiety by Being Present through Effective,  
Intentional and Two-Way Communication

# 1. Provide Stability through Continuity of Services

Organizations can provide an important element of stability for missionaries just by **continuing to provide quality services**. Maintaining this continuity of service in an ever-changing environment will require intention as an organization.

**Prioritizing support for the home office team** is one way to sustain services for the field. Maintaining steady communication regarding roles, expectations and the implications of various and on-going changes related to Covid-19 will help maintain a culture of care and quality service. This care for the home office team can range from emotional health support to staying current with employee safety and legal policies throughout the crisis.

**Planning for likely changes for the organization** is another way to support the continuation of quality services for those on the field. Once you've identified potential changes, you can make plans to minimize losses in service if those changes do come into play.

One shift to be prepared for is home office team availability. The ability of staff to carry out their roles will likely be in flux throughout this time either due to illness or the need to care for others. Staff hours or positions may also be reduced in light of financial changes for your organization. While you can't control the absences on the horizon, you can plan for them. This will enable you to most effectively keep services consistent even though your office team may not be.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER-

What will we need to maintain our services throughout the COVID-19 crisis?

How can we keep healthy and stay strong as a home office team?

How can we effectively adjust to future changes?

- *What gaps will this change make in our process as we currently have it set up?*
- *Would this change influence missionary access or interface in any way?*
- *What new services for missionaries or bolstering of existing services would we need if this change were to take place?*

What do we need to be prepared for absences and staff changes?

- *How would workflow change if [name] were not available? How would we effectively cover their absence?*
- *How would decision-making, authority or lines of communication be altered if [name] were not available?*

## 2. Reduce Isolation by Facilitating Belonging

At a time when missionaries are being obliged to participate in social distancing and many have experienced sudden losses of relationship due to emergency relocations, organizations have the natural capacity to facilitate well-being by **building and maintaining stable networks of support.**

Most organizations already have a system of networks based on geography, ministry focus or team structures. These are intuitive starting places for building connection during this time. At the same time, this may be an opportunity for your organization to create new networks of support that will more effectively serve your needs. It is also a good opportunity to check the strength of any communication system and consider how they can serve your people in times of continuous change.

One common blind spot for any organizational system is its potential to leave people out. This is a critical time to **check connections and confirm that they are actually working as the organization intends.** For example, there may be individuals who fall outside the ordinary organizational structures or those for whom the field team is not a source of emotional support and is, instead, a source of tension or felt isolation. Identifying these cases and facilitating new networks of support and belonging is an opportunity to strengthen both individuals and the organization overall. Conversely, failing to check the effectiveness of these networks and make adjustments, could result in situations where missionaries feel left out or forgotten in this critical time.

In addition, due to the nature of the Covid-19, "regular" structures may face on-going shifts, as the situations of individual missionaries continue to change. Individuals and families may leave the field or, in some instances, could leave the organization altogether. Creating networks of belonging that will support missionaries through these transitions is one significant opportunity to support their well-being.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER-

How can we facilitate belonging throughout the Covid-19 crisis?

Are our current systems of connection effectively reaching everyone we want to reach?

How can we design flexibility into our networks of connection so they can effectively and continuously provide support through the transitions associated with Covid-19?

### 3. Create Safety by Addressing the Real Challenges of this Time Together

Covid-19 presents an unprecedented time of change with an unknown ending. Due to the time-extended shape of this crisis, it follows that the emerging challenges from this time will evolve as the situation evolves.

**Establishing on-going avenues for hearing missionaries** during this time will allow you to understand and help address the specific challenges that are confronting them as they arise. For many, simply clarifying and legitimizing their work in this new, unexpected and ambiguous season could be a very powerful form of stress relief.

Once you've identified presenting needs, the next step is working together to **find relevant avenues for engaging those needs**. The key word here is *relevant*. Organizational responses that come across as disconnected from missionary concerns have the potential amplify feelings of isolation for missionaries as they try to face potentially overwhelming challenges. For example, one organizational response might be pointing people to resources or trainings. Simply passing something on without evaluating its suitability for the person, the situation or your own estimation of the quality (i.e. it's from a source your trust) could actually harm instead of help.

Beyond addressing present needs, organizations can also **take a lead in preparing for future challenges**. This can be done by supporting field teams with tools, training and structure to update field policies, risk assessments and contingency plans in order to respond to the changing nature of Covid-19. This is true for the home office as well. As an organization, you can provide a great deal of safety for missionaries by taking time to review organizational policies and procedures in light of Covid-19. Getting policies up to date and communicating any changes or pertinent details to missionaries is one way to provide stability in this season of unknowns.

**Addressing the economic implications of Covid-19 is one area where organizations can be proactive**. Taking the lead by offering training on fundraising during times of economic crises, or providing clarity and forthrightness when it comes to organizational policies and procedures regarding repatriation and funding levels are all opportunities to contribute to missionary well-being right now. Other potentially relevant topics could include

training in critical incident debriefing, coping with the witness of suffering as well as re-imagining ministry roles during this time.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER-

How can we effectively address the challenges facing our missionaries?

How can we stay connected to emerging concerns for our missionaries?

How can we provide our missionaries with relevant support? How will we know if our support has come across as relevant?

How can we stand with missionaries as they prepare for the challenges of the future?

- What policies, procedures or contingency plans do we need review to be prepared for this challenge?
- What creative alternatives do we have for facing this challenge?
- What will be important to keep in mind as we communicate about this challenge?

## 4. Facilitate Care by Supporting Immediate Supervisors

There is resounding evidence that **immediate supervisors play a critical role when it comes to well-being in any workplace**. This is especially true for missionaries, where an immediate supervisor may provide one of the only regular connections people have to the organization. This makes immediate supervisors key links for communication and, especially at times like this, primary representatives of the support and care of the organization.

Helping immediate supervisors remember the significance of their voices and actions for the missionaries they serve and **supporting them to carry out their roles effectively** is a strategic way to offer the care the organization intends for its members. For many missionaries, immediate supervisors are a primary embodiment of the organization. Consider the unique needs of each leader. During Covid-19, leadership will encompass more than getting things done. It will require empathetic listening, connecting with varying and changing missionary needs, and responding honestly and relevantly. While challenging, this time offers an incredible opportunity to build trust.

Since immediate supervisors are a key factor in the well-being of those under them, it is important to be intentional about supporting their well-being as well. Organizations can take an active role by doing things such as:

- Increasing communication with immediate supervisors, ensuring they are empowered with up-to-date information, clear expectations and avenues for effectively feeding back to the organization what they are learning from their teams.
- Emphasizing the importance of self-care by encouraging them to establish rhythms of rest and clear boundaries (this can pose a particular challenge with increased digitalization of work) and by ensuring their networks of prayer and social support are operating well.
- Providing training, coaching or other supports these leaders need to be able to do their jobs well through Covid-19. If you're not sure what they need, ask (and since things will be changing, plan on asking again).

One unique issue mission organizations face is adequately covering leadership gaps when immediate supervisors change geographic location or become unavailable. It is important to think ahead and identify how changes in

immediate supervisor positions would affect those missionaries they care for and plan ahead for how to cover these gaps. It is also important to give extra levels of support to anyone who has been placed in a temporary leadership role to cover or who is new to their role as a supervisor. Assume these leaders will need extra help and plan to walk closely with them through this time.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER-

In what ways do we need to support our immediate supervisors through Covid-19 so they can support our missionaries?

What values do we hope to reflect as we engage our missionaries during Covid-19?

- How can these values be expressed through engagements with immediate supervisors?

What do immediate supervisors need to stay healthy, strong and supported through Covid-19?

How can we maximize opportunities to build trust with our missionaries through Covid-19?

What existing leadership gaps do we need to cover or prepare to cover?

How are we providing proactive support for newly appointed and temporary leaders?

- How are we staying connected with their needs?
- How are we keeping them resourced so they can carry out their role effectively?

## 5. Ease Anxiety by Being Present through Effective, Intentional and Two-Way Communication

The importance of communication during this time cannot be over-emphasized. Organizations can reduce stress for missionaries by being present through effective communication, by communicating with intention and by ensuring there are clear avenues for two-way communication.

Giving missionaries up-to-date and accurate information eases anxiety and empowers them to make the decisions they need to make. **When missionaries are expecting to hear from the organization, prolonged silence can feel like abandonment.** Similarly, if the organization cannot support a particular need, it is better to have that clearly articulated with honesty and compassion than to be left in quiet uncertainty. The main point is to let missionaries know what is happening, even if that means letting them know you don't know or sharing bad news. You may want to consider implementing temporary Covid-19 communication systems that are more frequent and flexible than your ordinary systems.

Organizations can do a great deal by intentionally leading from faith, values and vision through Covid-19. **Consider how your communications can reflect what is most important to your organization.** Sharing the journey of your decision-making process and showing how you arrived at the final outcome can help make even the most difficult decisions more palatable. Similarly, taking time to put yourself in the shoes of the missionaries you serve, thinking through organizational decisions as if you were out on the field right now or had been suddenly evacuated home, can do a great deal to shape your communications and ease anxiety for the missionaries receiving them.

**One of the most effective ways for organizations to stay connected to ways to support missionaries will need through Covid-19 is to ask them.** This may seem obvious, but maintaining consistent avenues for two-way communication from members is a challenge for all organizations, even those that explicitly value this. Some mission organizations have regular patterns of including field team representatives in significant policy decisions. Other organizations have strong interpersonal networks that allow members of the organization to hear needs and respond to them through these same relational networks. Whatever your



organization has set up in this regard, Covid-19 presents a significant opportunity for establishing avenues for missionary feedback, expression of needs, and participation in decision-making. Valuing communication through the honouring of missionary voice is one very real way to support missionary well-being.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER-

How can we be present to our missionaries in how we handle communication through Covid-19?

How can we communicate effectively during this time?

- *Are our systems of communication reaching everyone we want to reach?*

How can we reflect what is most important to our organization through our communications in this time?

- *What narratives and attitudes are shaping the atmosphere of the home office team right now?*
- *How are these narratives and attitudes reflected in our communication with people on the field?*

How might this communication sound differently if heard from a missionary perspective?

- *What important issues are on the line for missionaries in this communication?*
- *How can we show missionaries our process in addressing this issue? Would that be helpful?*
- *How can we honor and respect missionaries, even as we are telling them things they don't want to hear?*

How can we create opportunities for missionary participation in decision-making and policy creation during this time?

## Supporting Missionary Well-Being Through COVID-19

Covid-19 presents numerous opportunities for mission organizations to engage directly in the well-being of missionaries. Maintaining a continuity of services, building up networks of support, openly addressing the challenges of this time, supporting immediate supervisors and establishing strong communication systems, are all ways organizations can provide stability, reduce stress and increase resilience. This is not a to-do list, but rather a starting place for considering how your organization can make the most of opportunities to support missionary well-being through this crisis.

*\*If you would like to explore the topics in this article further, please use the email below to request the “Five Opportunities for Organizations to Support Missionary Well-Being through COVID-19: CHECKLIST.” It is designed as a self-guided process to help your organization identify opportunities to support well-being through this challenging time.*

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If you have any questions, feedback or would like to follow up with what emerged for you from this article, please feel free to contact me at [Kimberly.drage@novo.org](mailto:Kimberly.drage@novo.org).