



How Churches and Agencies Can Work Together

Interview By Tory Ruark, Chief Operations Officer at SOE

This month we want to explore the idea of churches and agencies working together for the Great Commission. Our hope is to give voice to both perspectives, so they can understand each other and improve the way they work together.

Giving voice to each side are the following people:

Churches

Asher Sarjent, Global Outreach Pastor, Cole Community Church

Charlotte Kassis, SOE Board Member and recent Team Coordinator at Shepherd Church

Agencies

Stephanie Soderstrom, Coordinator for Volunteer Engagement, Reformed Church in America

Kate Borders, Senior Director of Mobilization, World Orphans

What follows are answers from our panelists to my questions. If you still have questions after reading this article, [sign up for our webinar](#), where we'll be going deeper with some of these panelists. Members can register for the webinar for free through their member portal.

Q: As an agency, how do you help churches fulfill the Great Commission rather than replace them?

Stephanie: Our entire organization exists to serve the church, to resource the church, and to work with and through local churches. For us, that looks like helping churches find great partners and organize mission trips that they lead, and creating resources that help the church engage in mission in healthy ways. We support the church in doing the work of mission. We don't do it by ourselves.

Kate: Our mission is to equip, inspire and mobilize the church to care for orphaned and vulnerable children. Our distinctives include a commitment to the local church and to partnership, so everything we do is centered around empowering local churches to fulfill the Great Commission.

We also encourage churches to build long-term partnerships, so that they can build the kind of relational credibility with the partner and the community that will allow them to come alongside of them in authentic ways, encouraging them as they carry out the Great Commission.

Q: As an agency, what are you able to do that most churches can't?

Kate: It's not that churches *can't* do what we do, but many would not know where to start, nor have the time or resources. Current research and recommendations on establishing healthy partnerships are (rightly) very detailed. Where a church from the US may not know where to start in exploring and developing a partnership, we bring history, relationships and an introduction to a vetted partner.

Stephanie: The average church in North America today has fewer than 100 people in attendance on a Sunday. Having fewer than 100 attendees does NOT mean that a church doesn't desire or have a strong missional focus. Our organization is able to provide extra support and expertise that churches need in order to engage in a short-term mission well. We maintain partnerships with churches and organizations all over the world, so that we can recommend the best fit for the kind of mission each of our churches feel called to. Along with many other resources we provide, we make it easier for churches to plan and carry out successful short-term mission trips, even when they don't have a dedicated mission pastor.

Q: As a church, what are the advantages of working with an agency on an STM trip?

Asher: Agencies often have years of experience along with tools, resources and training that can help my church be more effective in our preparation, on-field and post-field ministry. As a Global Outreach Pastor my plate is full, and a good STM agency can help carry the logistical support that is needed to have effective STM ministry. They can help equip me and my staff for ministry so I can do the work of the ministry.

Charlotte: Agencies can help with the administrative side, such as forms, training information for team meetings, medical insurance, fundraising and even providing ministry materials. Organizations may also have built-in debriefing and devotional materials with schedules for teams. If an organization runs the trip, it usually aligns well with the mission and vision of that organization and the benefits short-term mission trips can bring.

Q: As a church, what are the disadvantages of working with an agency on an STM trip?

Charlotte: It's a disadvantage if the agency has a rigid way of doing mission trips that works best for them, but may not work well with the church. When working with an agency, there may be things happening behind the scenes that the church may not be aware of and could cause for

awkward situations while on ground. It can also be a disadvantage if the agency relationship keeps the church from forming a relationship with the host.

Asher: God has called the church to do the work of raising up laborers. Therefore, they should be in the drivers' seat. The challenge of working with an agency is when they are not willing to adjust their process for the church. Yes, things need to be done in a certain way and there are very good reasons why an agency has their process for their STM program. But, when an agency is not willing to adjust their process based on what the church can do, it can be frustrating.

Also, the extra fees associated with using an agency can be a challenge.

Q: What services would you like to have the agency provide?

Asher: I like it when agencies provide resources for equipping in pre-field training, help to vet ministry locations, and good follow-through material.

Charlotte: It's super helpful when the organization provides clear expectations of the church and its STM members. I also like it when the agency helps us connect with the host prior to arrival, so the team can learn more about where they are going and the ministry with which they are working. Ultimately, communication is key. It's important that both the church and organization have the space to walk through the trip process together.

Q: As an agency, what services or roles would you like to have the churches provide?

Stephanie: We expect that churches know their people better than we do, and so they select their own teams, lead their own training, and do most of the active work of the STM. We don't lead their trips, but we do support them in any capacity that we can to make sure that their trips are healthy and in line with best practices.

Kate: Certainly, the financial commitment of the US church is important. That allows their international church partner to expand the reach into their community. But the love, support, prayer and encouragement that the US church brings to their international church partner is the heart and foundation of our ministry model.

Q: As an agency, what duties or responsibilities are important for you to remain in charge of?

Stephanie: I see the church as the main vehicle for mission, so to say that our organization is "in charge" of what the church does is a struggle for me. We want to make sure that everything we do is in line with best practices, so that when churches engage with us they learn and experience what

it is to do mission in an intentional, healthy way. It's our responsibility to make sure that churches know what a difference these practices make, so that they will start to use them every time they engage in mission, whether that's a one-day local project or a global mission experience.

Kate: History has shown us that an experienced third party is very beneficial for financial accountability and working through challenges and/or conflicts in the partnership. An ongoing presence of our international staff has also been key to strengthening the church and the community.

Q: What duties or responsibilities do you want to maintain authority over as the church?

Asher: For me and my church, we want to use our registration process and forms. We would prefer not to have to ask team members to complete two different applications or release forms. We also want to raise funds through our system and then send one check for ministry expenses. We also would prefer to make our own airline reservations and purchase our own insurance.

Charlotte: Since we know our congregation better, it is helpful to have authority over the selection of team members and team leaders. There may be specific things that a church has in a typical trip protocol, such as specific safety and risk management guidelines.

Q: What key elements have led to healthy/successful partnerships between churches and organizations in the past?

Asher: Good, timely and detailed communication that flows from a relationship (preferably face to face as often as possible). Mutual understanding of each other's vision and goals, and those being in alignment with one another. Finally, an agreement in writing as to expectations and who is responsible for what.

Kate: Humility. When we start with an active pursuit of learning and submitting to each other, there is a better chance of a healthy partnership.

Charlotte: One of the key elements that was helpful in one partnership was that the organization saw the benefit of having a good relationship with supporting churches and was willing to take the time to get to know our church. This led to both the church and organization wanting to find ways they could help each other in the trip process. Being willing to be flexible on both sides and not having a rigid way of doing things can be valuable to healthy partnerships.

Q: What do you need from the church in debriefing and follow-through for your trips to be as effective as possible?

Kate: A time commitment! Since World Orphans exists to equip, inspire and mobilize the church, we rely heavily on the leaders from our US church partners for debrief and follow-through. We

have good resources, but since the leaders from our US church partners are the ones with the ongoing relationship with team members, we desire to equip those leaders to debrief well and have ongoing follow-through.

Stephanie: Since we don't go on the STMs we help our churches plan, we provide all kinds of resources around debriefing and follow through. We encourage churches to take time before they leave their mission partner to debrief everything that has happened and to create a plan for how they are going to continue to engage in the work that the Spirit is calling them to do.

Q: What do you need from the agency in the area of debriefing and follow-through for your trips to be as effective as possible?

Charlotte: Whoever leads the trip should be well-versed in debriefing materials and where debriefing should fit in the trip process. Some organizations provide this material if doing a trip with them, and that is helpful. Debriefing and follow-through should be scheduled before the trip, and it's helpful if debriefing can be worked into the schedule before the team departs.