



Christian Workers – Finance for Living Series

support groups

who's holding your ladder?

Stephen Mathews



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taking the first step

Being called into mission is a bit like climbing up on to a roof – if you've got someone holding your ladder at the bottom, you feel a lot more secure.

This paper is intended to help those in Christian Ministry consider the place that support groups may have in their own life and ministry and to set out why, at Stewardship, we see them as such an important piece in the jigsaw of the ministry of those with whom we work.

above all else . . .

Over the years, our work at Stewardship has brought us into contact with many different Christian ministries, in many different situations: geographical, practical and psychological. With those Christian Workers who work independently, those who work with churches, those who work with mission agencies and those who work with other charities and NGOs. There are a number of common themes we see across these ministries and 'support' – both financial and practical – is one that recurs time and again.

I remember meeting with a good friend who had been involved in leading a Christian ministry for about 12 years. I asked him what single piece of advice would he want to share?

"Above all else", he said "do not lose your personal support group".

This same advice was echoed by Lynn Green, International Chair of YWAM, who has been raising support for four decades. He acknowledges the vital role that his own personal support group had played for him and his wife, Marti. "At the beginning of our ministry we were often living hand to mouth and it felt quite stressful and lonely. Our great friends Lyndon and Celia Bowring suggested forming a smallish group to specifically support us in our ministry. For over 35 years we have been meeting two or three times a year. It is important to invest time and energy into these friendships; nurturing your support group is as important as your mission work. In turn, they have enriched our lives and provided stability and a refuge through difficult times. Most of us underestimate the value of wise counsel and I can't stress enough that for anyone entering the mission field, setting up your support group should be a main priority."

This paper quotes often from both Lynn and Lyndon Bowring. Both have led Christian ministries for longer than they would care to remember and both had had significant influence on many hundreds, if not thousands of other Christian workers. Lynn as previously mentioned currently International Chair of YWAM and Lyndon Bowring having been Executive Chairman of CARE since 1983.

Peter and Taryn Prescott were one such couple who sought advice from Lynn Green and set up a support group. Being newly married, and about to embark on mission abroad they approached couples who were older than them and who would be able to provide strong links to their local churches.

"We are newly married and it is quite challenging having to think about finances and housing. I try not to worry about these things and I think that a support group will help us immensely coping with this sometimes uncertain life we have been called to".

what is a support group?

In essence a support group is halfway between a trustee board and a trusted group of friends – there to support, serve and influence. The relationship should be a two-way thing and because they are committed to you (and the rest of your group) they are more than just ‘mates’; they take their responsibility seriously.

They are also in the role of advisers and guides; to monitor how things are going and offer their own insights. At times they may need to ask searching questions to develop a sense of accountability around issues such as timetables, attitudes, finance and debt.

what is it NOT?

A support group is not there to exercise control, power or authority. It is not a legal board and neither should it replace the need for you to take responsibility for your own decisions.

It should not be the source of all your financial support. While it may be the source of some finance, it should not be its key purpose. “Fundraising is important but ‘friend raising’ is vital”, says Lyndon Bowring. Myles Wilson, author of *Funding the Family Business*, has been raising his own personal support for over 30 years and says “I cannot emphasise enough that the real goal isn’t about raising money. The real goal is to raise up people and create solid, long-term partnerships.”

Finally, don’t expect the support group to be the administration team for the ministry, that’s not its purpose either.

why have one?

Having a team of people ‘in your corner’ is a huge source of encouragement, and remember, this is two-way. The friendships that develop will hopefully be strong and lasting and this can only enhance the prayer support that comes with understanding. Because they are independent, their focus is on you and your ministry and the continuity they bring can provide a sense of stability – they are holding your ladder and won’t let go.

Sometimes we need other people to help us see things more clearly, perhaps provide advice or ask those questions that maybe we need to ask ourselves. As Lyndon Bowring says, “Most of us underestimate the value of wise counsel and I can’t stress enough that for anyone entering the mission field, setting up your support group should be a main priority.”

As mentioned above, fundraising is not the key purpose of the group, however, it should stand with the Christian Worker in matters of finance and help in a time of crisis.



who should be part of it?

Lyndon Bowring suggests the following:

“I would suggest that if you are a mission worker overseas that you set up two groups: one in your sending country and another group of supportive friends where you work. It is important to have different strengths and experiences in your group. Think about including a variety of ages, perhaps an accountant, business person or lawyer, but above all it is commitment and enthusiasm that you are looking for.”

Choose people who you think will be able to work together, in one sense this is more important than diversity but be careful not just to ask ‘people like us’! Think about bringing together a cross-section of people some of whom may have church leadership or business experience and in the case of married couples, include at least one married couple in your group. Try to draw on a wide age range and keep numbers manageable – 10 or 12 is probably as high as you should go and it may be less according to your situation.

Some questions to think about when considering who you might ask:

- ➔ Do they value what you are doing and believe in you?
- ➔ Can you be honest with them?
- ➔ Will they be able to ask you those ‘difficult’ questions?
- ➔ Can you be relaxed or even have fun with them?
- ➔ Are they accessible in order to meet up?



finally

Stewardship has produced some short videos about support groups featuring Lynn Green and Lyndon Bowring and these are available to view on our YouTube page under the 'supporting mission' playlist:

<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL63E968E1688F3F70>

The four subject areas covered are:

- Why have a support group?
- What is a support group?
- How to set up a support group
- What happens at a meeting?

If you would like to read more on the subject, Rod and Ruthie Gilbert with Ross and Christine Paterson have written a book called "PACT to Go! A cross-cultural mission workers' guide to creating a personal accountability and care team" published by Elemental Publishing (USA) and available in the UK from Amazon.

The Finance for Living series of papers forms part of Stewardship's resources for Christian Workers. With contributions from a panel of advisors each of whom has significant experience within the area of mission, the series draws on their expertise to offer biblical teaching and practical guidance on issues affecting those living on personal financial support. The papers are available to download from the Stewardship website see <http://www.stewardship.org.uk/christian-workers>

This paper has been written by Stephen Mathews. Stephen is a senior consultant with Stewardship with a background in professional accountancy and church leadership. Thanks also go to Lyndon Bowring, Lynn Green and Peter and Taryn Prescott for their contributions to this paper.

If you have any questions or comments arising from the material presented here, you can contact us at education@stewardship.org.uk or by telephone on 0208 502 8585.