

When Does a Missionary Retire?

By David H. Snyder

After almost 52 years of ministry, Baptist International Missions is experiencing a significant time of transition. Several of those who have held leadership positions at the World Missions Center have asked to officially step back from their present duties due to the effects of many years in ministry (see articles on pages 9–11 and 16–20).



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There are also a good number of missionaries who now find themselves needing to return to the States after serving for decades on the foreign field. All of these BIMI personnel have raised support from local churches and have received that support for many years. When that support was raised, not much thought was given to when it would end. In fact, in many cases it was understood that support would continue until the missionary entered heaven. With this in mind, many churches and many missionaries are now asking the question “When does a missionary retire?” In the process of answering this question, a follow-up question is often asked: “How long should a missionary continue receiving support?”

One dictionary defines the word *retire* as “to leave your job or stop working because of having reached a particular age or because of ill health, or to cause someone or something to stop being employed or used.”¹ Although this would be what we typically think of when we hear the word *retirement*, this definition does not necessarily apply to missionaries. To “leave

your job” or to “stop working” or to “stop being employed or used” is not something that is easily accepted by those in full-time missionary service. Furthermore, it would be impossible to identify a “particular age” when a missionary is supposed to retire. For the most part, missionaries plan to serve God until the day they meet the Lord in heaven. Some have said things such as “You can’t find retirement in the Bible” or “*the gifts and calling of God are without repentance*” (Romans 11:29). However, those who live a long life will most likely reach a point when their physical bodies will succumb to the realities of living in a sin-cursed world.

At this point it might be tempting to modify our original question to “Does a missionary retire?” This is also a good question to consider. However, since there is a great deal of difference with each missionary’s situation and because this topic is so broad, I will only be able

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to mention a few relevant thoughts in this editorial.

First, there are many missionaries who “retire” from the field but continue in ministry elsewhere. Generally, this is the time when a missionary returns to the United States after having served on foreign soil for many years. In a good number of these cases, the missionaries are no longer able to continue serving in a particular geographic location due to circumstances that have been complicated by their ages. Although they are not ministering on their original fields of service, God has given them a new place to continue serving Him. Their wealth of missionary experience is of great value. Some will get involved


by assisting in a stateside church plant, some will become Relief Missionaries,² and others will get involved in some other type of ministry God makes available to them. It is important to note that each particular situation will be different and each missionary will be involved at various levels of service.

Second, there is retirement from the job of being a missionary. In most cases, this is the time when a missionary is not able to do the work that is required of those in full-time ministry. Although these missionaries are no longer “officially” missionaries, they will continue to serve in their local church as much as possible. For these servants of God, there is no question about their *willingness* to do the work. The main thing that has changed is their *ability* to continue in the work.

When considering these two aspects of missionary retirement, our follow-up question should now be asked: “How long should a missionary continue receiving support?” To answer this question, it is important for the church to contact the missionary and inquire about his individual situation. Has the missionary made financial preparations for this time in his life? Will he be receiving Social Security or some other type of income? Has he assumed that churches would support him for his entire life? What will his ministry now entail? While some missionaries have planned for the day when churches discontinue their support, many have not. For those who have joined BIMI in recent years, a retirement plan has been prepared for them. They contribute to this plan

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monthly, which will help them to be ready for their retirement years. However, many of the missionaries who are retiring today joined BIMI prior to this plan and are counting on the continued support of their churches. Again, it needs to be emphasized that each particular situation is going to be different and must be handled individually.³

Finally, there is *Full Retirement*. Truly, this is the ultimate answer to our original question. This is what every missionary works toward throughout his entire life. Of course, Full Retirement comes only when a missionary enters heaven. It will be a wonderful day when the faithful missionary stands before the Lord and hears “*Well done, thou good and faithful servant...*” (Matthew 25:21). God’s dedicated servant will rejoice in seeing those who are in heaven because of his ministry—eternal fruit that resulted from a life committed to the Lord’s service. This is also fruit that abounds to the account of those who supported this missionary, not only while he was on the field but also while he was “retired.” 

- 1 Cambridge University Press ©2011, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/american-english/>
- 2 Relief Missionaries are usually based in the United States. Their ministry regularly takes them to different mission fields around the world to fill in for missionaries needing to take a furlough. Relief Missionaries serve at churches for different lengths of time. Sometimes they are at a church for several weeks and other times for many months. Occasionally, they may fill in for an entire year.
- 3 Baptist International Missions suggests that every church enact a missions policy. This will provide a foundation from which to individually deal with issues such as retiring missionaries, missionary widows, etc. For more information on developing a church missions policy, go to <http://www.bimi.org/content/reChurchMissionPolicy.php>.