

How do I choose the right mission organisation?

The mission organisations that exist today are many and varied, in their ministries, their locations, their beliefs and their approach. You're going to have to do a lot of research to find the right one. Here are some basic tips.

Denominational organisations. With some organisations, there's a clue in the name (e.g. BMS = Baptist Missionary Society). So if you're part of a denominational church, its affiliated mission organisation is a good place to start. If you don't know if there is one, ask your church leader.

Personal contacts. If you have friends who are already serving as missions partners, or if your church has historic links with a mission organisation, that could be a good way in.

Location of service. If you feel called to work in (say) Patagonia, you don't need to worry about the Africa Missionary Society. Go to your favourite search engine and find Patagonia Outreach the easy way.

Missions fairs. Some churches have missions weekends, or at Bible Colleges there are mission events where most of the major missions organisations come along. At conventions like Keswick and New Wine there is always a special zone where they have exhibition stands run by mission organisations. Make the most of these opportunities to meet their missionaries and find out what they do and how they do it.

If those tips haven't got you started, you need to dig deeper and start refining your search according to what you feel called to. Christian Vocations has a website (www.christianvocations.org) with lots of support material on it and a database which tells you who does what and where. So if you feel you have a calling to be a civil engineer, or to go to Togo, CV will very quickly whittle down the numbers to the few who match your criteria.

Then you need to start fine-tuning:

Entry requirements. What do they want from you? Can you fulfil their entry requirements? Are they reasonable and realistic?

Theology. This could be of particular importance if you feel strongly about particular issues (e.g. women in leadership, charismatic gifts, infant baptism). Make sure you're not going to have to compromise some cherished values.

Finance. What are the financial arrangements? Do they take a sum to cover central admin? Do they pool finances? Or are you expected to do your funding separately?

Experience. Do they know what they're doing? Have they got decades of experience in their field, or are they breaking new ground? Do you prefer to be part of creating something excitingly new, or would you rather build on the decades of achievements of others?

Multinational. Do you enjoy working closely with teams made up of a variety of different nationalities (and languages!) or would you prefer to be working alongside people who share your home culture?

Management and decision-making. Are they top-down or bottom-up? Do you prefer to be led by experienced people who know what they're doing, or be part of a team that draws on the experience of everyone in the group to make its decisions?

Lifestyle. How do they expect you to behave while you're in the field, and will that suit you? Will you be living among nationals or separately in a western-style compound? How would you feel about that?

Support. How will they support you when you're in the field? Will you be actively managed, with pastoral support and a team context, or will you be pretty much on your own? Which would you prefer?

Size. Do you want to be part of a small team, or a huge organisation?

Training. How are they going to help you find your feet? Drop you in the deep end or orientate and coach you for an extended period? Which style suits you better?

Relationship with your church. How does the organisation relate to your church? Does it feel your church is a partner in sending you, or does it want to get on with things by itself? Which is going to work best for you and your church?

There are many different ways of doing things, often depending on an organisation's denominational background, history and culture of ministry. It's not a question of right or wrong, but which size fits you. It's important that you take the opportunity to get to know the organisation you're thinking of joining. Take some time over it. Go to prayer meetings or conferences. Try to meet and get to know some of its missions partners. Get in touch with its leadership. Familiarise yourself with its website and subscribe to its magazine. Take a short trip with them as a trial, so you can meet the people you're going to be working with once you're in the field. Above all, take time over it. Because it's more than just a job you can walk into and leave easily. It's a vocation. In some ways it's like a marriage: you could be together for a long time, so you'd better make sure you're a good fit.