

How the Local Church Can Develop a Strategy for Healthy Sending and Supporting

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Churches may see their role in sending members to the ends of the earth as the finish line instead of the beginning of a partnership. Some churches even lose their identity as the lead role in the sending process along the way, turning all responsibility over to a sending agency. That becomes a problem since the church ought to send members and care for them after they arrive on the field.

So why is the local church's role in sending and member care so important for her sent ones? First, the Scriptures speak to the local church's responsibility in setting apart, sending, and supporting missionaries, as in passages like 3 John 5-8, Philippians 2:25-30, and Acts 14:26-28. Second, through my serving in the local church as a missions pastor, spending time on the field, and interacting with missionaries, agencies, and churches on this issue, I see firsthand the need for sending churches to provide faithful missionary care for their sent ones.

Before unpacking the *what* and the *how* of local churches sending and providing missionary care, let's understand the *why* from these three passages of Scripture.

A Biblical Basis for Sending and Supporting Missionaries

3 John 5-8: Sending Forth “for the sake of the Name”

Mack Stiles, missionary to the Middle East, says, “Healthy churches produce healthy Christians who become healthy missionaries.”¹ The local church, both its members and leaders, should be sending and supporting well for the promotion and advancement of the gospel. An example of such a church is in 3 John 5-8 (ESV), as John commends his friend Gaius for sending and supporting well “for the sake of the Name.”

The overriding theological implication in these four verses is that a church sends her missionaries to go out for the sake of the Name. It is because individuals have been saved and gathered into a local body that the church corporately is sent on mission to proclaim that same gospel. This text also strongly supports individuals not only sending and supporting in isolation but also doing so in community. Steve Jennings, pastor of Immanuel Church in Fujairah, United Arab Emirates, posits, “The Scriptures give us a pattern of discipling and sending out. This should be the normal life of a church so that when the younger Christians witness the older Christians walk this path, they better understand what path they have to walk.”² While some members are called to go, others are called to stay. Danny Akin exhorts, “We may not physically go where they go, but when we support them, we go with them anyway. We work together, as one, for the truth. Some give support and some are sent. Both are essential.”³ This rhythm of recruiting, raising up, and releasing is what Jesus talks about when he calls us to “pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send forth laborers into his harvest” (Luke 10:2).

¹ Mack Stiles, “9 Marks of Healthy Missions,” *9 Marks Journal: Missions* (Fall 2015):31.

² Steve Jennings, “What Would Happen If You Sent Your Best?,” *9 Marks Journal: Missions* (Fall 2015): 41-42.

³ Daniel Akin, *1,2,3 John*, vol. 38 of NAC (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Reference, 2001), 245.

Philippians 2:25-30: The Gift of Partnership between Sender and Sent One

The book of Acts reveals that Barnabas and Paul were faithful members of the church of Antioch before being sent out by the church. As they went about evangelizing, discipling, and planting churches, Paul wrote about the partnership he experienced with new believers gathered in local churches.

The *gold standard* of such a partnership could be seen with the church in Philippi. Exploring Paul's partnership with this church and specifically with one of their own, Epaphroditus shows how missionary care serves the persevering work of gospel proclamation. On behalf of the church at Philippi, Epaphroditus carried out the role of a *minister* to Paul, meeting Paul's material and spiritual needs. Such action mirrored what Paul wrote elsewhere in his letter of Christ's sacrificial nature in going to the cross, which is the foundation for Christian partnership.

Despite the service Epaphroditus had carried out for Paul and the Philippians, he longed to be back with his church (Phil 2:26). While the timing is unclear, we later read that Epaphroditus became ill and was in great distress. Ralph Martin writes, "Epaphroditus' longing for his native city and a restoration to his Christian friends there has been variously interpreted as homesickness . . . or, a pastoral solicitude for the 'flock' from which he is separated or, more likely, a desire to be back home to defend Paul's gospel."⁴

The surrounding verses reveal Epaphroditus's desire to be back with the church, but also to report all that was carried out on their behalf. The context of these verses helps to explain the challenges that partnership brings as well as emphasize the hand of God that upholds a laborer. In spite of the illness, Epaphroditus came to Paul's aid and was healed in the process according to the mercy of God.

God's hand was guiding Paul's circumstances, Epaphroditus' condition, and the church at Philippi for the sake of the gospel being furthered and God's

⁴ Ralph Martin, *Philippians*, TNTC, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1959, 1987, 2008), 139.

messenger to the Gentiles being strengthened and encouraged. Epaphroditus had the mind of Christ in his actions, and Paul reminded the church at Philippi (and us) that they should walk in that same example, particularly as it relates to supporting those sent out to further the witness of the gospel.

The crescendo of commendation reached its peak as Paul told the Philippians to receive Epaphroditus with joy and also honor his service (Phil 2:29). Paul received this *sent one* who served with humility and honor, and he then exhorted the church to receive him back in the same manner. What the Philippians could not do because they were not physically able to be with Paul, Epaphroditus fulfilled. Epaphroditus was willing to count the cost and sacrifice his life to do what the church could not do in full. Not only did Paul receive the gifts (4:18), but the very presence of Epaphroditus was, in a sense, a gift to Paul as well.

Acts 14:26-28: Returning Home-How to Receive, Report, and Re-Enter the Sending Church

After concluding their first missionary journey through Cyprus, South Galatia, and Pamphylia, Paul and Barnabas returned to the church at Antioch, where they “spent no little time” with the members and reported how God had used them (14:26–28). Both in sending out *sent ones* and receiving them back, the church at Antioch reflects the local church’s crucial role in caring for missionaries through sending, supporting, and receiving. Darrell Bock simply and powerfully states: “Mission drives the dynamic community that Luke describes.”⁵

Paul and Barnabas, set apart and sent out by the church at Antioch in Acts 13:1–3, carry out their first missionary journey by planting churches and establishing elders. Schnabel notes three truths in this section (Acts 13:1–14:28): “The two missionaries have faithfully carried out their mission,

⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts: Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 308.

so they return to the church that sent them . . . the proclamation of the gospel is the ‘work’ . . . [and] the conversions of the Jews and Gentiles and establishment of new congregations was the result of the grace of God.”⁶ Upon their return, they report back to the very church that had commended them to the grace of God, share all that God had done through them, and express how a door of faith had been opened to the Gentiles (Acts 14:26–27).

The return of Paul and Barnabas to the church at Antioch gives us a picture of accountability in mission partnerships and demonstrates the reciprocal nature of care. These men recognized their responsibility to speak back into the life of the church, both by commending the church for their support and by communicating all that God had done through them. In turn, the church at Antioch gained a greater understanding of Paul and Barnabas’s missionary efforts and of how to provide care for those they sent out.

I get most energized by being on the field with missionaries, but a close second is hearing from them while they are stateside. Walking alongside them as they readjust to their *home* culture, providing a listening ear, and commending them for their service help build their confidence and give honor and care where it is due. The church should seek to hear not only about the work but also about how the missionaries are doing, thereby fulfilling their responsibility to continue discipling their sent ones, both on and off the field.

Strategic Elements for Sending and Supporting Missionaries

Having explored a biblical framework for sending and supporting missionaries well, how does a church apply these passages into the practice of sending and caring for missionaries well? While there are a number of ways that the church can begin to develop adequate sending and missionary care for

⁶ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 615.

her sent ones, I will explore four elements related to pre-field, on-field, and post-field missionary sending and care.

Assessment and Training – Pre-field Care

Churches need to work alongside their missionaries and in partnership with the agency during the pre-field stage to assess a candidate's calling and readiness, as well as find the right ministry fit, which will aid in missionary retention on the field and strengthen the partnership among entities. Often, churches tend to be reactive in this stage, rather than proactive in *calling out the called*, and in turn taking the lead on assessment and development. As churches observe and evaluate a candidate's readiness, they have the opportunity to note areas where they can extend care and establish metrics by which to do so. As a missionary candidate is both known in relationship and their gifts are evidenced by a good cross-section of the church, the church can have collective confidence in that candidate's call, character, and competency.

Churches can assess readiness practically by crafting a personal development plan through their pre-field correspondence with the mission agency and field personnel. This will enable the church (sender), missionary (sent one), and agency to know what it is they want this member to *know* (biblical, theological, ecclesiological, missiological knowledge), *be* (Christian character), and *do* (practical ministry equipping). Churches that build this foundational relationship in assessing and developing will be able to, with deep conviction, deploy their missionaries to the field for faithful service.

Prayer – On-Field Care

Prayer is often seen as a means to the work of missions, rather than the work itself. Missionaries want to know that their sending and supporting churches are praying for them and appreciate them. Often, the church tends to pray after a struggle has begun rather than pray before, during, and after

a missionary's time of service. Prayer, though, must be a tool the church wields continually.

Praying for missionaries not only provides individual care but also builds communal bonds across the life of the church. Finding ways to include prayer for the nations across the church's various ministries helps build awareness and increase advocacy for missionaries. Whether it is by praying for missionaries in the service, highlighting them through weekly newsletters, including them in a member directory, or having them share with the church when stateside, thinking strategically about prayer for sent ones is crucial.

Advocacy Teams – On-Field Care

One practical and purposeful way to build member care into the life of the church is through advocacy teams. Advocacy care teams can include a small group of members (four to six members) assigned to a missionary who have covenanted and committed to ongoing care. Members of these teams get to know their missionaries, their stories, their heart for ministry, and even their successes and disappointments on the field.

I recall an Adult Bible Fellowship class that adopted one of our church's missionary families. This class regularly prayed for that family, corresponded with them, and sent members of that class to serve with them through ministry and missionary care trips. The depth of the partnership grew because the depth and breadth of the relationship grew through real and tangible expressions of support and care.

Re-Entry Care – Post-Field Care

Post-field care can be the most challenging care for churches to provide. Missionaries come home for numerous reasons—scheduled visits, life events, abrupt endings, or retirements—and just as the church needs to be the launching pad for its missionaries, it also needs to be the place to which its missionaries can safely and confidently return.

Churches should be for their missionaries a safe place for openness, honesty, and transparency as they plan towards this re-entry phase. Planning begins by acknowledging that no one-size-fits-all approach to reentry care exists and that providing appropriate care will require considering variables such as a missionary's length of time on the field, unique needs, and attitudes. Our church put together a process by which we knew six months to a year ahead of time when the missionary would be returning stateside. Because we had a mission house at our disposal, we were able to plan for meeting tangible needs through the house and the amenities it included, as well as helping with schooling and transportation needs.

Churches must not only plan with their missionaries for this post-field season, but also be present as missionaries return home. Just as Paul and Barnabas spent “no little time” with the church at Antioch after returning from their first missionary journey, missionaries need to have significant opportunities to interface with their sending church (Acts 14:27). This time of interaction as missionaries share stories, successes, difficulties, and challenges is known as *debriefing*—a time that allows the missionary to share burdens of missionary life with others who provide a listening ear.

As churches and partners plan for post-field care and make themselves present for debriefing, the third area in which the church can assist with reintegration is providing on-ramps into the church. Church leaders will need to establish clear avenues and boundaries for ministry as they incorporate their missionaries back into the life of the church, ensuring their missionaries feel valued but not overextended.

All three of the stages of missionary care—pre-field, on-field, and post-field—are essential and tie into one another, in laying forth a wholistic strategy for missionary sending and care. Determine as a church what the right next steps are for developing a strategy to provide such care. Seek out members who have strong relationships with sent ones and a passion to lead in this ministry, then watch the church labor side by side in sending and caring for your missionaries. Care so much for those you send and support that you

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can join with Paul in saying, “we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well” (1 Thess 2:8). Your sent ones have been called by God to go out from your church to share Christ in another part of the world, and you can help them persevere in declaring, demonstrating, and displaying his gospel as you hold the rope and never let go.⁷

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⁷ This article is adapted from the book *Holding the Rope: How the Local Church Can Care for Its Sent Ones* which I wrote. Let me encourage you to pick up a copy and use it as a resource within your church to care well for your sent ones. Ryan Martin, *Holding the Rope: How the Local Church Can Care for Its Sent Ones* (Louisville, KY: The Upstream Collective, 2022).