

Commissioned and Carried: One Church's Example of Sending Field Workers Well

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I dreamed that people from my stateside church were carrying me around inside the church building. In the dream, I had shown up at an event that was meant to honor all our missionaries. If this had been a real-life missions service, people might have gathered around each missionary and prayed for us in small groups. In my dream, however, people picked us up and carried us along a designated route (imagine a CrossFit competition where participants carry a teammate as if they were a pole with elbows). A middle-aged teaching pastor with a dad bod was carrying me when he faltered near the finish line. I offered him some (somewhat awkward) encouragement, “Be glad I just lost twenty pounds.”

At that point, I woke up. The dream was laughable, but I woke up that morning thousands of miles away, grateful for the church that carries me. I wondered who was praying for me while I slept.

Sent Well

I chose to go overseas with IMB because it is a church-based organization. Somewhere in the middle of my application process, I sat in my missions pastor's office, and he told me very directly, “WE are SENDIng YOU.” His

promise landed so strongly in my heart that it almost felt like a word from God himself. I am not sent by a parachurch organization. My church sent me.

Sending missionaries overseas does not look like it used to. My church did not stand ashore and wave goodbye as I boarded a ship with all my belongings packed in a coffin. These days, sending missionaries well translates into supporting and serving them on a regular basis. My church supports and serves me and my fellow field workers through regular check-ins, care coaches, a field office and guesthouses on the field, equipping opportunities, virtual meetings, elder support, stateside care, and their all-star advocacy teams. Over the years, my church has learned these effective practices to carry us and our burdens as we all persevere on the mission together. We have weathered storms and trials together, we have mourned together, we have celebrated together, and we have grown together. Below, I have elaborated on the provision and care that have significantly undergirded me and my fellow field workers. I hope my church's experiences and our growth over the years will inspire and encourage other churches as they develop their capacity to support the missionaries they send.

Regular Check-ins

Every four months, my church asks me to submit an online form they call a Personal Leadership Report (PLR). The questions on the PLR address my health, happiness, and holiness. In these reports, I update my personal care coach about my physical and mental health, my relationships, my time with God and spiritual disciplines, my work, my language and cultural acquisition, and my support from the States. My favorite question on this report helps me assess my time management and my purpose: "How would you rate your weekly alignment with your long-term vision over the last four months?" This simple question rejuvenates me and my vision for living overseas, and it helps me course correct when I have strayed from my God-given mission.

The PLRs help me grow in self-leadership while I am physically separated from the church. They motivate me, and they also sound the alarm when I have trouble. My care coach prays through the PLRs I submit, and she emails me a response to what I have written. She encourages me, tells me how she is praying for me, and shares any wisdom I may need for what I am going through.

Care Coaches

My church assigns a care coach to every missionary family. Care coaches are usually staff or experienced field workers with appropriate gifts who have been trained for the role. My own care coach has walked with me through the angst of team conflict and the sadness of a sudden departure from a city I will always love. I have also watched a care team rally around a dear couple as the husband fought an addictive sin. A friend was cared for after she was unjustly arrested. Another friend received care after her husband was murdered. Missionaries need special care. No one comes home without wounds. In the midst of our pain, our care coaches walk with us and carry us through the difficulties.

Field Office and Guesthouses on the Field

When I unexpectedly had to leave the country where I lived, I booked a direct flight to the city where my church has a field office and a guesthouse. The team there welcomed me, housed me, and allowed me to decompress while I sought God and his direction. Shortly after that, they opened another guesthouse on another continent where our overseas workers can find respite and receive counseling as they recover from the challenges of living cross-culturally and bearing the name of Jesus in hard places. The staff in the field office and guesthouses have typically already experienced many of the same losses their guests suffer. These staff teams also serve as care coaches, strategists, and equippers along with the stateside staff. I realize that few

churches have the resources and the experienced workers to provide this level of care, so I am extremely grateful for my church's generosity and their commitment to our missionaries and the mission.

Equipping Opportunities

Each year when every member of my church recommits to our covenant with one another, we agree to train and be trained “for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness” (Eph 4:12–13 CSB). My church’s devotion to the equipping of the saints has led them to offer our field workers week-long theology intensives in overseas locations, online leadership courses and strategy training, webinars to help us work with people affected by trauma, free books and breakout sessions at retreats on the field, links to mission-minded podcasts and articles in their quarterly newsletter for overseas workers, PDF guides to their sermon series, and music downloads from the worship team.

I am not surprised that a teaching pastor carried me in my crazy dream. My church takes their responsibility to equip us seriously. That responsibility does not end when we leave the country.

Virtual Meetings

Occasionally, my church hosts virtual prayer meetings for our field workers. These times nurture our faith and provide mutual encouragement. We once had an online prayer meeting to intentionally address cancer. At the time, several overseas workers were undergoing treatments, and cancer had touched many of us through the years. Several workers had lost loved ones to the disease, and several more had survived cancer themselves. Eventually, two of our field workers died from cancer. This special prayer time had prepared us to care for one another well when we lost them.

Virtual meetings have helped us care for one another amid other tragedies too. My church once had to address an incident of abuse. Hours before the elders addressed the broader church, some elders and a few staff members hosted a virtual meeting for all of us overseas. They informed us, answered our questions, and made a counselor available for those who might have been retraumatized by the announcement. They did not forget us. They made us a priority.

Elder Support

The elders engage in our sending process from the very beginning. They assess and confirm our calling, commission us, and help us prepare to go. They also continue their roles while we are overseas. If we have significant needs, the elders lead a Community of Care for us, especially if we need correction or redirection. They organize these Communities of Care to include counselors, coaches, accountability partners, and prayer partners who provide a safe and stable community for restoration and growth.

When we are back in the States, our elders not only meet with us and pray for us, but they also bring us before the church at the quarterly meetings for members and allow the whole church to pray for our specific needs and challenges. They know these needs and challenges well because they have been praying for them each time we submit our PLRs. The elders also celebrate with us when God meets those needs and helps us overcome the challenges, and they welcome us home when we transition from the field.

Stateside Care

Each time we travel back to the States, my church asks about our logistical needs for our upcoming time with them. They help us find housing and transportation, medical professionals, or whatever we need. The people of the church often purchase homes with extra space for us or even second homes and extra cars for overseas workers to use while we are in town. The

church staff make a point to meet with missionaries for a meal or prayer and a time to debrief.

Periodically, the staff organize get-togethers for the field workers who are in town so we can reconnect and enjoy the presence of dear friends who have walked in our shoes and can understand our lives. Sometimes the church stocks our pantries with groceries or organizes baby showers and meals for new parents. I have watched the church care for families who have returned to the States for high-risk births, intensive medical treatments, the death of a child, and the struggles of adopted children. I cannot imagine a better community when we are in need. The whole church stands ready to help us.

Advocacy Teams

To make sure we have specific advocates for us in the church, each field worker establishes an advocacy team before they leave the country. That team then acts as the communication hub and the first responders for the overseas family. Currently, advocacy teams develop primarily through our church's missional communities (MCs). MCs are small groups that meet off campus during the week and already practice the rhythms of advocacy teams—fellowshipping and praying together. By partnering with missionaries, the MCs embrace a clear missional objective that strengthens their community and encourages their faith. One staff member likes to quip, "Partnering with a missionary and their ministry puts the M in MC."

Many of the MCs in my church have adopted missionaries. Some have faithfully served their missionary for many years. However, in the life cycle of a small group, advocacy teams sometimes dissolve or resign. Though the loss may concern the field worker, others in the church are waiting to step into the advocacy role. This transition gives them the opportunity to engage in the mission too.

I established my advocacy team under an older model that involved recruiting specific people to fill specific roles: a team leader, a prayer advocate, a communications manager, a finances and physical needs manager, and a reentry coordinator.¹ This older model has worked well for me over the years, and I have marveled at the ways my advocacy team has served me. They have provided a place to stay, a car to drive, care when I have been ill, and help with banking, my driver's license, and other administrative hassles that balloon for people who live overseas. To them, their help may seem small, but to me, my advocacy team is my lifeline. They are the people I look forward to seeing when I go back home. I am honored to call them my friends.

High-Value Support

In March of 2024, my church surveyed our overseas workers to find out which areas of support we valued. The results confirmed an overwhelmingly positive sentiment toward the ways our church serves us. Seventy-six percent of the responses were either “I value this [area of support]” or “I highly value this [area of support].” The most highly valued support was practical, such as financial assistance and finding housing and vehicles for our time in the States. I can attest that the church's generosity and logistical help relieve much stress.

Second to the practical support was the biannual overseas gathering, where the church comes to our side of the world to provide emotional and spiritual support. To me, this gathering feels like a homecoming with friends I have missed, the care and rest I have needed, and the Spirit of God speaking (and singing) in my heart language. I always leave with a full tank of grace (and an overflowing suitcase).

¹ These roles were inspired by Neal Pirollo's book *Serving as Senders Today: How to Care for Your Missionaries as They Prepare to Go, Are on the Field and Return Home*, Twentieth Anniversary ed. (San Diego: Emmaus Road International, 2012).

The second section of the survey asked about our interest in potential additional support in the future. The strongest interest in additional support was for on-the-field visits from advocacy teams and church leaders. The overseas workers also highly valued additional on-the-field equipping for marriage and parenting.

The third section of the survey asked where the field workers turn for different types of assistance. The results showed that workers usually turn to their sending agencies for crisis management, security parameters, and contingency planning. They typically turn to their field teams for help with visas and logistical needs as well as strategy and leadership coaching. The field workers mostly turned to the church for financial assistance and related needs, spiritual formation, and help in times of crisis. Notably, for crisis management, missionaries turn to all three sources of assistance—sending agencies, field teams, and the church. In these times, everyone works together to provide the needed support.

My Responsibility

The last time I was back at my church's quarterly membership meeting and meal, a caring staff member at my table admitted it was helpful to have me with them because sometimes, when we are out of sight, we are out of mind. I admitted that out-of-sight, out-of-mind is a mutual problem. Sometimes I do not think about them either, so I can understand their need to hear from me and see me regularly. Much like Paul and Silas reported back to the church in Antioch (Acts 14:26–27), I need to keep in touch with the church that sent me. My responsibility to communicate is just as important as theirs. If I want to feel like I am part of the family, I need them to know what is going on in my life, and I need to know what is going on in their lives.

I have learned over the years that the people in my church need me as much as I need them. Even though my church may sometimes treat me as a hero, they are not my fan club. My church family is made up of real people with real struggles. And sometimes they fail. They need me to pray for them

as much as I need them to pray for me. I will probably never be able to repay them for all they do for me, but this is not a one-way relationship. We all need care from one another.

How Do They Do It All?

Perhaps this level of sending, supporting, and serving seems untenable to most churches. Fifteen years ago, this was not the reality at my church either. Even now, as a few of the staff reviewed an early draft of this article, one responded, “Our aspiration is always to do the things you've captured in this article, better. At times we are better at some things than others. God has blessed our church to be able to provide the support and services that we have provided over the years. It is only through his kindness and provision that we do what we feel he has called us to.” Thus far has God helped us.

Another staff member responded to an early draft of this article with the recognition that the church has not always supported field workers as well as they wished. “I would say that the things you have included are true of us at our best, but we could also confess there are many times we have missed the mark over the years.” They are still growing as senders.

I believe the growth has come incrementally as my church has prioritized missions and leaned into God's passion for the nations to know him. The leaders have discipled the whole church to be involved in missions—embracing the mission of God, making disciples, praying, caring, advocating, going, giving, and sharing resources. Most church members get infected with God's heart for his mission through solid biblical teaching in the Sunday services or in on-campus classes and off-campus MCs. People around them also demonstrate what it means to live missionally. Then, when they see God working among them, they dream of seeing him work around the world.

We Are Not There Yet

The greatest leaps my church has made in learning to send field workers came about because one staff member caught God's vision to send more people than anyone else had dared to dream of sending. Once the stories of the first workers we sent started spreading around the church, the volunteers and their advocates could not be stopped. Since then, my church has not only sent more workers than that staff member dreamed of, but they have also sent the workers well, carrying everyone they have commissioned. My church continues to emphasize their responsibility and their privilege to be a people in whom God multiplies His workers because the fields are ready for harvest.

Still, I woke up from my bizarre dream that morning before my church carried me to the end of the designated route. In reality, as in the dream, we have not yet reached the finish line. We still have far to go. The harvest is much bigger and more beautiful than we imagined.

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