

The Church and the Missionary

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William Carey is called the father of the modern missionary movement. At 33 years of age, he embarked on the greatest journey of his life. Burdened with the “spiritual darkness” of the vast continents, he helped form the Baptist Missionary Society¹ and was appointed its first missionary to India. Before Carey’s departure, fellow Baptist Andrew Fuller asked, “There is a gold mine in India; but it seems as deep as the center of the earth; who will venture to explore it?” “I will go down,” responded William Carey, “but remember that you must hold the rope.”²

“Holding the Ropes” has become an apt metaphor for how sending churches support and undergird those sent out as missionaries. The church in Antioch provides a powerful biblical example of holding the rope, as it served as a sending and supporting church for Paul’s missionary journeys (Acts 13:1–3; 14:26; 15:32–33, 36–40; 18:22–23).

IMB missionaries on the field need their sending churches to follow this model—holding the rope with support, prayers, finances, wise counsel, and more. They also need to find a healthy, local church (or help establish one)

¹ Originally known as “The Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Amongst the Heathen”

² <https://www.wholesomewords.org/missions/bcarey9.html>

in their new home to give them a place to connect and flourish in gospel ministry. In both settings, the church is foundational for healthy long-term service.

This article explores what those connections look like in real-time with a few of our colleagues on the field. Our missionaries serve in many different roles and contexts, which affects the kind of church they are in and their ministry within and through the church. Samantha Conners* in Europe serves in a support role. She and her family attend an International church in the city and have been on the field for nine years. Tyrell and Nida Kilkenny* in Asia work with nationals and speak the local language. Their church is multi-lingual to meet the needs of a diverse population. They are long-termers and have worshipped with this local congregation and been supported in ministry by them for 20 years. Greg and Joanna Hughes* in the Horn of Africa are first-termers and are working in a high-security area. Though their focus is on reaching their UPG, they meet with other workers in a house church for fellowship and encouragement. Geoff and Jennifer Bowen* are short-term workers in Asia. They had hoped to connect with the local churches but the language barrier has made it difficult. They attend an international church which has given them an outlet for ministry and worship. These four families shared their experiences with staying connected to church back at home and in their new home.

Home Church: Preparation, Support, and Connection

The IMB has always required church endorsement for service overseas. Most missionaries were part of a healthy church where discipleship and accountability shaped their call. Churches committed to pray for their missionaries.

In the last few years, the International Mission Board (IMB) began initiatives to more closely involve the church and has asked it to play a pivotal role in the preparation and deployment process. In the 7-step process laid

out on the IMB website,³ step number 2 is an 8-10 week assessment of the candidate by the home church to help determine his/her readiness for missionary service. This new initiative has helped churches to take a bigger role in supporting *their* missionary on the field.

Greg and Joanna Hughes are a good example. Their home church helped evaluate and train them in evangelism. The church's DNA was a nations-focused mindset for prayer, giving, short-term trips, and partnerships with several personnel on the field. The Hughes were the first long-term unit sent out specifically by their church. This has led to healthy partnership now that they are serving in the Horn of Africa.

"They adopted our people group and have been committed in prayer and short-term trips," said Joanna. "My biggest encouragement is when individuals reply to our newsletters to ask a question or comment about something specific we shared, or to tell me what they're praying about specifically, or share something God is doing in their life."

Samantha Conners' church has supported them with prayers, care packages, and money raised through VBS for special ministry projects. Recently, the church sent their first short-term team to work with the Conners on the field. Samantha hopes to provide more opportunities for them to partner with them in the future.

Tyrell and Nida Kilkenny in Asia came to the field in 1992. Their pastor was a former IMB missionary. "Bro. Miles Seaborn and his wife Jeannie of Birchman Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, prepared us by personally talking to us about life on the field, raising a family (we were not yet parents), and prayed over us often," Nida said. They continue to support in prayer and hosting when the Kilkennys are stateside.

The Kilkenny's closest church connection is currently with Travis Avenue Baptist Church in Fort Worth because they have provided a missionary house

³ <https://www.imb.org/go/process/>

for them on stateside assignment. Travis Avenue wants to send a team to join in their ministry to an unreached people group in Asia.

Geoff and Jennifer Bowen were on staff at a large church before coming to the field. A high security placement overseas and a change of pastor have made it difficult to stay as connected as they hoped. The Bowens rely more on individual friends and contacts within the church to be their support rather than the church as a whole.

However, the ongoing connections are a two-way street. Prioritizing these relationships has to be an intentional part of the missionary's ministry as well as a priority of their home church. The Connors send weekly prayer requests and videos several times a year. The Bowens text in real time with their closer contacts. The Hughes talk, via Signal, to members of their church, send monthly newsletters, offer volunteer opportunities, and create special resources and videos for special events. All of the families interviewed spend time in person with their home churches when they are in the states—reconnecting with their home churches to build relationships, give updates, encourage involvement, and share how God is at work through their joint effort.

Church on the Field: fellowship, ministry opportunities, and support

Church on the mission field can take many shapes and forms depending on the missionary's role, local culture, people group focus, language level, and security needs. The Connors and Bowens are involved in support roles in larger cities where the international population is significant. They are involved in international churches where they use their gifts, disciple others, and find fellowship.

The Kilkennys live in a place where there are several local Baptist churches already planted, and their pastor desires for their church to be a haven for them as they reach out to a people group without any churches.

“However, we feel strongly about being involved in local church ministry,” Nida Kilkenny said. “I attend the women's group, we attend special times of preaching, we pray for our staff, and encourage members in missions.” This church has been home for 20 years, and their children were baptized there. “It has been a great place to receive spiritual feeding, and a wonderful place to use our gifts to encourage the members,” Nida said. “We minister to them through prayer, encouraging local missionaries, discipling new believers, and supporting our pastoral staff.”

The Hughes are reaching an unreached people group in the horn of Africa, and they meet for weekly worship in a home group with other missionaries. It is not fully church as there is not yet covenant membership, elders, or ordinances, but they are able to be discipled and disciple others. “Some of the Europeans in our house group are in the early phases of language learning, and we serve the group by bringing them along on prayer walks, village visits, and evangelism opportunities,” Joanna said.

“One way our house group has really ministered to our family is by caring for our 2 young kids. We don't have Sunday School teachers, VBS leaders, or a big network of other Christian families to pour into our kids - so we are really grateful for our house group's support as we seek to parent in a godly way, and the way they model a life of faith to our kids,” Joanna said.

These local churches on the field are the catalyst for missionary zeal, prayer support, ministry opportunities, and healthy discipleship. They are “friends of the same faith to get you fired up and excited about reaching the lost.” Jennifer Bowen said.

Challenges for Staying Connected

Whether it is with the home church in the States or with the local church on the field, often the “job” of the missionary makes it difficult to stay in close contact. The Kilkennys and the Bowens both travel a lot as part of their job and it makes consistent worship attendance difficult. The Kilkennys

long tenure at their church means that relationships are solidified and their ongoing support for the pastors and other local missionaries is a way they continue to bless their congregation even when they are away. The Bowens being short-term in their location have had to be intentional to get involved whenever, however they can, no matter how sporadic it might be.

Another challenge is security. This is especially true for the Bowens and the Hughes. Living in areas hostile to the Gospel makes it tricky to safely communicate with believers at home and locally about what they are doing. The wrong information in the wrong hands could harm local Christians and jeopardize their ability to stay in the country.

A third challenge is involving SBC churches in ministry on the field. Depending on job focus or security needs, hosting a team might not be as simple as joining alongside the work the missionary is already doing. Field personnel must be flexible and creative in finding ways for their local churches in the states to serve. Many, like Samantha Connors, find ways to involve their church in ministry through their international church or through the local missionary team that can utilize English speakers in outreach events.

Lastly, the biggest challenge is always time. The life of a missionary is busy. Between navigating in a new language and culture, encouraging local believers, evangelizing and fulfilling job responsibilities, there is not a lot of there is not a lot of discretionary time, so one needs to be diligent and intentional in order to keep the rope-holders informed and prayerful.

Advice for Church Relationships

Church is not a what, but a who. It's not a building or a universal idea, but a group of people. One church planter in the Pacific Northwest said it like this: "The church is the regenerate people of God saved by the power of God for the purposes of God in this world."⁴

⁴ Jeff Vanderstelt, "Who is the church?" interview with *Desiring God*; March 19, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gfqsoSJ-Fgk>.

This understanding of church expands exponentially for missionaries serving overseas. They have a people at home sending, praying, “holding the ropes,” and a people in their country of service encouraging, celebrating, and discipling alongside them. Participation in a church body is a must for following Christ and for effective, biblical ministry. Staying connected both at home and abroad is of utmost importance. “You need the church more than you know, so make it a priority,” said Samantha Conners.

The missionaries interviewed for this article offered the following advice for new missionaries as they provide several practical suggestions for relating to sending churches and local churches on the field.

1. Define the relationship that you want to have with your home church before you leave the US and then keep up with your commitments to your US church. (Conners)
2. Find your advocates in your home church, and stay in touch with these people individually. Send family updates, ask about their lives, pray for one another, and be real friends with these people. Church staffs are busy and many causes vie for ministers’ time. Your lay friends who will remember you in prayer will help the church remember you, too. (Hughes)
3. Get a good grasp of what the security situation is where you’re going and figure out how to communicate effectively within those parameters. (Bowen)
4. Don’t wait --get involved quickly and consistently with local believers. (Bowen)
5. Don’t go to your new local church with a “what can I get out of it” attitude. Go looking to encourage and equip local workers or believers. (Kilkennys)
6. If you are learning a language for your people, get involved in a local language church quickly. It might not be worshipful for you at first, but will be important to learn the language and culture. (Bowen)

**Names changed for security purposes*