

Editor's Note, Fall 2024

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The church is God's ordained instrument for the evangelization of the world. This is obviously true of the universal Church, but it is equally true of local churches. As Baptists we believe that the local church is fundamental to the life of every Christian disciple and essential to the mission God has given them. A church is a group of baptized believers in Jesus who are committed to each other to be the body of Christ to one another and who assemble regularly to carry out the functions assigned to them by Scripture. Those functions include biblical evangelism, discipleship, worship, preaching and teaching, prayer, the biblical ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, fellowship, membership, biblical leadership, giving, accountability and discipline, and mission. Every Christian needs to be a committed member of such a local church, and no Christian can be healthy otherwise.

How, then, do local churches engage in global missions? They do so on every level. Local churches are responsible for the most important part of missionary preparation. Missionaries are disciples of Jesus who cross geographic, linguistic, and/or cultural boundaries to make disciples for Jesus where Jesus is not yet known. Discipleship is the core of missionary preparation, and discipleship happens biblically in the context of a local church. Only as local churches faithfully disciple their members will effective missionaries emerge. Local churches also have the primary responsibility for challenging their members to missionary service and for assessing their

readiness for deployment. Churches should include the imperative of global missions in their regular worship, prayer, and teaching. They should spur their members on to radical obedience. They are also in the best possible position to assess the gifting and maturity of members who desire missionary service. Not all churches know how to assess missionary readiness, so the International Mission Board provides a detailed process for churches to use. Still, local churches are in the best position to determine if and when their members are qualified to be cross-cultural missionaries.

Local churches send missionaries. What happens then? The experience of missionaries on the field runs the gamut from abandonment to micro-management. Some missionaries leave for the field and never hear from their sending churches the entire time they are overseas. Others have well-meaning sending churches that try to direct their daily lives from halfway around the world. The ideal is regular support and encouragement that recognizes the limits imposed by distance. Similarly, the issue of church membership is highly debated. Do missionaries remain members of their sending churches – churches they do not attend for years full of people they never see face to face? Does the sending church retain strategic oversight over the missionaries it sends? As proponents of meaningful church membership, we are convinced that missionaries must join churches where they serve (either churches they plant or existing churches on the ground), and those churches have the primary responsibility for pastoral care of the overseas workers.

Missionaries go to the field to plant or strengthen local churches. Biblical mission is church-centric mission. Disciples are made in the context of local churches. Healthy church formation is an integral component of the missionary task. Church planting is messy, but we do not believe that we can faithfully fulfill the Great Commission without it.

In summary, local churches train, assess, and send missionaries to plant and nurture local churches among the nations. This issue of the *Great Commission Baptist Journal of Missions* explores what that means. The authors

of these articles bring years of experience in a variety of settings to bear on the subject. It is our prayer that these articles will spur churches to more faithful mission engagement and spur missionaries to more faithful church formation.