

The local church as an active partner in selecting and sending a missionary.

In our last e-zine, we touched on the idea of a local church being involved in the selection of individuals for gospel ministry. Let's take a moment to consider this idea of selection and what it might mean for a local church. Some time ago I met a young man in one of the newer missionary sending countries who was preparing to leave for missionary service. Upon inquiring, I found out that he had been called to a meeting of the church elders a few days previously, where he had been told that they had selected him as their missionary to a certain country. He was told his destination, given a ticket and told to get on his way! Not quite what we have in mind, although the enthusiasm of the elders is commendable.

If we look at the account in Acts 13:1-3, there are several things we can note that are relevant to our topic:

1. The church was already culturally well adjusted, with leaders drawn from several different cultural backgrounds - Simeon who is called Niger (Lat. 'black') presumably a black African, Lucius from Cyrene in North Africa, and Manaen, who had grown up in Herod's court, and of course Paul and Barnabas with their different cultural backgrounds. The church leadership reflected the cultural diversity of Antioch, something that is not always true in our churches today. It challenges us to look at the demographics of our locality and to compare that with the cultural make-up of our church. It further challenges us to look at the cultural mix of our congregation and to compare that with the cultural mix of our leadership - it is all too easy for those two to be out of step with each other. That was not the case at Antioch.
2. This particular event was initiated through the ministry of the Holy Spirit and not through some policy decision of the leadership. There is no problem with churches having well structured mission programs, but we always need to be reminded that without the presence and activity of the Spirit, nothing of eternal value will be achieved.
3. The context of this event was one of the church at worship. They were in touch with their God and expressing their relationship through worship. John Piper's "Let the Nations Be Glad" would fit in perfectly here. As they were worshipping their God in a right relationship with Him, so they were able to receive His leading concerning their responsibility in the world. Worship is a crucial aspect of mission.
4. They did not hesitate to release their best, to release two gifted and experienced men who could have been described as essential to the life of the local church. Likewise Silas, who went with Paul on his second missionary journey, was a leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:22). Are we open to that possibility in our own church? When the need of a Bible teacher somewhere in the world is highlighted, do we immediately think of the pastor or some other effective Bible teacher in the church? Or do we think of someone who could do the task and whose departure would not leave too big a hole in the ministry of the church? We need to be careful we don't put restrictions on the activity of the Spirit, as we consider who in our church the Lord might want in cross cultural ministry.
5. The church identified with Paul and Barnabas in their going, by taking time to pray and to fast, and then by laying their hands on them as they sent them off. They made sure that Paul and Barnabas knew that the church saw themselves as active participants in their going. They were not heading off on some private adventure, but remained a part of the church that had selected and sent them.

6. The church maintained their involvement and interest, as seen in the reporting session in 14:27. This is also seen in the continuity of ministry mentioned in 15:35.

This cameo of a sending church raises a number of topics that we could benefit from discussing in relation to our own church. How do we select people for ministry? What are the pre-requisites that must be in place? What ministry training programs are needed? How do we make this a reality?