

The sending role of the local church

How does a Christian know that the Lord wants them to serve as a cross cultural missionary? Clearly there are many possible responses to that question, but in this paper we will specifically look at the role of the local church in the process. To put it another way, what is the role of the local church in selecting missionaries? Do they just wait until an individual in the church is moved by God and approaches the leadership to share their desire to be a missionary? Or is there a pro-active role for the church?

In thinking this through, we need to remind ourselves of the importance of the concept of 'sending' in Scripture. It is an essential element in the commissioning of the prophets in the Old Testament. Have a look at Moses (Exod 3:10), Isaiah (Isa 6:8), Jeremiah (Jer 1:7), and Ezekiel (Ezek 2:3). In Jesus' early instructions to His disciples concerning the world, He gave them the responsibility of asking the Lord to send out workers (Mt 9:38). Mark twice records that the disciples were sent by Jesus (3:14, 6:7). Jesus was very aware of His own 'sent-ness' (Lk 10:16) and relates this directly to the ministry of His own disciples (Jn 20:21).

As we move in to Acts, the church is seen to have an active sending role in 13:3. By his choice of words, Luke makes it clear that this is a releasing role, as opposed to the more directive role of the Holy Spirit in 13:4. The church's role provides the basis for the reporting back that is referred to in 14:27. We find the church having a sending involvement with Paul and Silas in 15:40, as well as some kind of related role with Timothy in 16:2. All of this is then reflected in Paul's own teaching in Rom 10:15.

Given this biblical picture, we have to consider its implications for the local church today, and particularly for those in leadership within the church. In this brief article, let me suggest three areas that need consideration by the church leadership:

1. The leadership needs to be aware of the spiritual development of the members and in close enough relationship to them to be able to recognise the Lord's gifting in their lives. Such a pastoral awareness and concern would lead to situations where the leaders might approach members and actually suggest that they should be considering the possibility of full time ministry.
2. The leadership needs to have a current and relevant awareness of the broad ministry opportunities around the world and, more particularly, an awareness of the personal and spiritual qualities that are needed in those who engage in full time ministry.
3. The leadership needs to ensure that appropriate training opportunities are being created in the life of the church and that potential ministry candidates are being encouraged to utilise and expand their developing skills.

Eph 4:11-13 makes it clear that all ministry roles are gifts to, and to be exercised for the benefit of, the body. This includes cross cultural ministry, so we need to bring the whole selection process within the life of the body and get away from the idea that the church has to wait until the individual has received their 'missionary call'. 'Being sent' is a more common concept in Scripture than 'being called', and we need to return it to its correct role in the life of the local church.