

## Supporting Mission: The relationship between missionary, sending organisation, sending church & individual supporters.



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When Paul & Barnabas were sent out by their church in Antioch (Acts 13), things seemed so simple. They were released from their duties and sent on their way. There was no 'sending organisation' and one can assume that the majority of their 'individual supporters' would have been part of their sending church. How much finance played a part in the sending out isn't clear, but their income was obviously supplemented by their own work along the way (making tents!). However, support is much more than finance and, judging by the content of letters that went between Paul and the churches that he built up connections with, there was a lot of support, encouragement and care going on.

With the advent of the modern missionary movement, the situation became more complex. Organisations were formed to do for the sending church what they couldn't do for themselves. In the modern world of mission, these organisations improved and facilitated the link between the sending church and the receiving location.

As the sending organisation's role grew, many of the tasks that the sending church traditionally had were catered for. This meant that the sending church stepped back from its responsibilities and allowed the sending organisation to take on more and more of the church's role. The result has been that many sending organisations stand on their own and have a very tenuous link with the local church.

Over the years, church and social communities became fragmented and this further diminished the sense of belonging and involvement from both the church and the missionary. As the direct involvement of churches diminished, their sense of ownership decreased along with their support for the missionaries. To compensate, many missionaries felt the need to spread their support net much wider to include supporting churches and individuals from a much wider area.

So we arrive at today's situation where a missionary's support network consists of a diverse and complex group of organisations, churches and individual supporters who play different support roles at different times. How do students feel about the involvement of these different parties in mission, and what issues do they face as these diverse group members seek to relate to each other?

### Expectations and Concerns

- 84% expressed some level of concern about living up to the expectations of their supporters with over one third (35%) being quite or very concerned
- 7% were very concerned that they would be misunderstood by their sending church, with 66% expressing some degree of concern about this
- 67% expressed some degree of concern that they would be misunderstood by their supporters
- 55% expressed no concern that they would be misunderstood by their sending organisation

Generally, a large number of students seem concerned about meeting the expectations of the other parties (sending church, sending organisation and supporters) and not being

misunderstood. This initially indicates that they have a fairly strong sense of responsibility to others and already see their role as being somewhat integrated with, and accountable to, these others. This is a healthy attitude to mission and I feel that the foundation of good teamwork and relationships is a respect for, and desire to involve, other parties who share, or have an interest in, the work. Often the criticism of a younger generation is that they 'do their own thing' regardless of the advice of their elders. Post-modern generations seem to be reversing this trend and have a stronger sense of relational identity than those who grew up in a modernist time when the individual was king and society respected and fuelled a certain amount of selfish ambition (even in, dare I say it, Christian circles).

Maybe these concerns are founded in the students observations that the relationships between missionaries, sending organisations and sending churches have often been strained in the past. Part of the concern seems to stem from their desire to make amends for previous times when different parties have fallen out over seemingly trivial issues of doctrine or behaviour. This reinforces the now widely accepted thought that for today's generation, relationship (belonging) is more important than behaviour or beliefs. This may be a challenge to organisations and churches whose very foundation has been built around a certain theology or practice that has defined them in Christian society and become their identity. In order to continue to be involved in mobilising, equipping and sending today's generation into mission, they might have to become more inclusive and tolerant than ever before.

Even putting aside their sending church and organisation, students still seem to feel a strong sense of responsibility toward their supporters. I believe a large part of this comes from the relational accountability described above, but we also live in a time where we can be highly informed and involved in the things we support. On an organisational level, the Charity Commission of England and Wales has an increasing desire for charities to be transparent and accountable to their supporters. This pattern is echoed in the individual supporter who often has similar demands on the missionary they are supporting. For the missionary, this requires a fairly high level of openness and information exchange with supporters which, with modern communication methods, creates a fair amount of work and stress on a day-to-day basis. Hence, I believe this is why many have concern about doing the right thing with their supporters. This concern isn't just about keeping supporters content by satisfactorily demonstrating where their money is being spent – it's more of a genuine desire to involve them in the work and seek their participation through interest, encouragement and prayer as well as finance.

## **Calling & Commitment**

- 98% felt called to the concept and lifestyle of mission, with 56% saying that they have a definite life-long call to mission
- 93% said that the level of commitment to the organisation depends on their knowledge of the organisation

It's interesting to see that a high number of students feel a strong sense of calling to mission. It's also interesting to see how they view this calling. Not so many years ago, and it was certainly true with a number of our compatriots on the mission field, people would have said that it was part of their calling to work with a certain organisation. Perhaps this came from a strong desire to identify with a group of people who shared a similar calling. Denominationalism in the church followed a similar pattern where people would often have said they were a Baptist or Methodist before they would have said that they were a Christian. Even in secular culture, loyalty to institutions was once so much more prevalent than it is today. Now, perhaps following similar trends in society, our Christian culture has changed and the denominational labels have diminished considerably. A similar pattern seems to

have been followed with individuals identifying with organisations. The organisation missionaries work with has much less importance in their calling than it might have done for previous generations. Sometimes a sending organisation doesn't even feature at all as missionaries seek to go independently.

Sending churches and organisations have often interpreted this reticence to identify with an institution or organisation as a lack of commitment on the part of the missionary. It might often be because those in positions of leadership in these institutions are still influenced by their traditional view. This creates a tension between the generations that can strain the relationships between sending church, sending organisation and missionary. Good relationships take time and it's important to get to know the real person and not make assumptions too early. Too often we judge people with our own yardstick – a measure that's often limited by our own pre-conceptions and hang-ups.

For students I have many times reiterated the cliché 'God is more concerned with who you are than with what you do or where you do it'. Many have given this lip service but our society has been strongly shaped by the modernist notion that 'you are what you do'. The result of this has been generations of 'doers' whose identity is in doing and not in being. If we as Christians were to redress this imbalance we would want to emphasise that it's important for us to discover our true identity in Christ before we then seek how He might have us move out in action. I, for one, am pleased to see that these students have a more holistic view of mission as being a life-long lifestyle and not just something they 'do' for a period in their life. If we are to be true missionaries and bring God's transforming grace to the situations we find ourselves in, it really doesn't matter whether we're church planting in a remote part of Africa ... or having a cup of tea with our neighbour in some leafy UK suburb!

## Finance

- 93% were very flexible as to how their mission might be financed
- 79% said they were happy to work part time if they could not raise enough support. 21% said they would certainly not want to do this

There were just two questions about financial support in the survey. Whilst one of these recognised the diverse way in which missions (and missionaries) are financed, neither question expressed the continual concerns that students have about finance.

Raising ones own financial support has always been a bigger issue for some than for others. Some people dread the idea of deputation, whereas others who have skills in this area or are gifted in communication often see it as more of a privilege than a duty. The fact that 79% indicated that they would be happy to work part time to supplement their support could demonstrate one of several things:

1. That they lack the faith to trust in God's complete provision
2. That they already struggle with finance at college, possibly working part-time to fund studies, and can't see how it will be any different in mission
3. That they see this as a reality in today's society where loans are more prevalent than grants

If we were going to look deeper at attitudes to financial support, I would want to ask a few more questions to get behind students' thinking. However, we are aware from just these two questions that finance is still a big issue and is likely to continue to play a large role in the relationship between missionary, sending church, sending organisation and individual supporters. One can assume that as the western church decreases in number, the pot for finance will get smaller and competition for the donor's pound will become even greater. The

pressure for finding personal support is usually put on the individual. Many sending organisations still give little help in raising support. Some provide the initial connection with potential supporting churches, others leave everything up to the missionary. Likewise, sending churches often neglect their responsibilities in this area forcing the missionary to look much further afield for their financial support. It's a sad fact that 'mission', and in particular 'non local mission', is off the agenda of many churches and the lack of funds for both missionaries and mission organisations reflects this.

This doesn't negate the fact that we, as a team, are still God's chosen instrument for mission and we need to make it work. For God's resources to be released into the areas where He wants to work, we need to be willing to both give and receive. This applies to all four parties concerned. Any one of these, by slipping into a narrow donor or recipient mentality, could become the blockage. Whatever role we play in mission, it's important for us to remain open to God's leading and be willing to step out in faith with a will resigned to His purposes.

I've always felt that part of the missionary's role has been to engage and involve the supporters in mission. Deputation is an opportunity not just for fund raising but also for the mobilisation, equipping and sending of others. As a missionary, there's nothing more satisfying than to see others encouraged into mission involvement because of our example or invitation. As for me having to raise my own support, in hindsight I wouldn't have wanted it any other way!

## Membercare

- 68% thought it would be quite likely or very likely that they would be adequately cared for by their sending organisation, although only 13% thought this very likely
- 75% thought it would be quite likely or very likely that they would be adequately cared for by their supporters, although only 10% thought this very likely
- 82% thought it would be quite likely or very likely that they would be adequately cared for by their colleagues, although only 10% thought this very likely

The answers to these questions seem to indicate that students are confused as to who should be providing the primary care for them when they are 'on the field'. The low percentage of folk who put 'very likely' on each of these questions also indicates that a large proportion of students suspect that they 'very likely' won't be cared for adequately by the other parties involved. It's not surprising as the support network (and, hence, care network) for current missionaries 'on the field' varies greatly from one person to the next. Who really should be the primary carer for missionaries?

Our biblical example from Paul & Barnabas shows the church as being the prime sending authority, and therefore should have the primary responsibility for care. However, as we've already explored, the arrival of the sending organisation to take on specialist roles has meant that this task has been, in part, passed to (or taken by!) the sending organisation. Perhaps this is because they have felt in a much better position to give this care. The organisation then has it's own combination of specialised personnel and pastoral staff, along with local team members who, between them, provide some structured form of care. The problem with this agency based system is that pastoral care is often better done by someone who is:

1. Somewhat removed from the day to day workings of the organisation
2. Someone who the missionary already feels comfortable with

It's no surprise to see that these conditions are rarely met by the organisation. Often the missionary receives care from a combination of sources including family & friends from

home, local friends outside the organisation, other specialists who are accessible to them (from other organisations or even their home church). In this complex situation with no one in overall responsibility, pastoral issues that missionaries face often fall through the cracks and they don't get the care they really need.

The recent growth in membercare by the sending agencies is a response by them to provide a better level of care for their missionaries. One concern with this is, if only the staff of the agency are involved, they may face a conflict of interest between providing what's best for the missionary and what's best for the agency. For membercare to really make headway, it needs to involve more than just one party. It would be great to see sending agencies, sending churches and missionaries getting together to talk about how they are going to make sure that the missionary is cared for. If this means utilising other folk in the missionary's own network then so be it. There is a tendency nowadays for individuals to build their own care networks and maybe the sending agency and church should empower them and allow them to do this. The important thing is that there are no gaps and each party (including the missionary) understands who is responsible for the care in any given situation. Ideally, this communication needs to continue throughout the missionary's service, keeping each party accountable to each other for the welfare of the missionary.

## **Conclusions**

### Communication

Due to the complex support network that now exists and the level of confusion as to who expects what and who provides what, clear and open communication has to be paramount. For the missionary, it's often hard to know what questions to ask so those with experience can often be useful in helping them determine the issues. Many of these would also come up in a training environment so I would hope that students pick much of this up during their time in mission training and orientation.

### Generational thinking

It's clear that there are significantly different attitudes to mission across today's generations. This shows up here in how calling and commitment is portrayed by the newer generations. It's important for those coming into mission to realise that they could be viewed very differently through the eyes of someone from a previous generation, and they should strive to articulate their motivation. Likewise, it's important for those in positions of organisation and church leadership (who are generally from a previous generation, but not always) to realise that today's missionary may be just as sure of their calling and just as committed, but will express that in quite a different way.

### Empowerment & resourcing

In today's society, the individual has so much control over their every day situation. This isn't just about choice but also the means (technology and resources) to do what previously was done by a specialist agent. For missionaries, this not only includes the practical things like booking flights and communicating across the world, but also arranging support and pastoral care. I think it's therefore important to empower missionaries to manage and control their own situation, perhaps under the help and guidance of 'experts'. It might be more appropriate for sending organisations to become more like resourcing agencies rather than controlling institutions.

### The Sending Church

With the decreasing involvement of sending organisations in mission, maybe it's time that the sending church rediscovered its role as the prime sending authority in mission. Many people are doing mission without the need of a sending organisation, but I can't see that they can do

it without a sending church (or sending churches). It's important for the missionary to get a good grounding in their local church before they leave for the field, and even before they ask the church to be their sending church.

Healthy relationships are formed when we have spent time in each others company, respected each others views and got to know the people behind the roles. There are no short-cuts to this sort of investment but there are huge rewards for all those who see it and live it as a priority.

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