

# The Lead Pastor's Role in Missionary Care

By **BRADLEY BELL**

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“Wilson!”

You probably know it as the most famous line from the film *Castaway*, starring Tom Hanks. If you haven't seen it, the story follows a man named Chuck Noland whose plane crashes en route to Malaysia, which strands him on a deserted island. There he's completely cut off from all relationships. And in the pain and madness of being so isolated, he eventually finds a volleyball, names it Wilson (since it's already branded on the face of the ball), and the two are then inseparable.

That is, until Chuck tries to boat away from the island. At one point in the wind and waves, Wilson accidentally floats away in the ocean. Chuck desperately tries to rescue him, but nearly drowns doing so. Sadly, as he makes his way back to the boat, he bawls over and over, “I'm sorry, Wilson!” And whatever thread of comedy that was left in the film has suddenly drowned in tragedy.

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You see, Chuck had bound Wilson to the boat, but not to himself. And the danger of failing to do that became reality: they drifted apart forever, relationship forsaken. Sadly, that's the same danger when it comes to missionary care. When the church sends someone globally on mission, there are *literally* hundreds of miles and days between them. And if they don't bind themselves together, then they'll drift apart forever, relationship forsaken.

## My Story

I learned this painful truth for myself when I served as a missionary. I had no idea what a “sending church” was—by that I mean a church who is committed to the ongoing care of missionaries before they go, while they're on the field, and upon their return. Ideally this relationship begins with the person submitting himself or herself to the church through membership. This allows you to assess their potential as a missionary candidate, disciple them into readiness and have confidence that your church is sending a qualified missionary as a blessing to the nations. And perhaps even more relevant to this article, it's the foundation that allows you to have an ongoing relationship of pastoral care in his or her life long after they leave for the field.

Unfortunately, I didn't have that. I had served as a youth minister at a church prior to going overseas. They loved me, affirmed my sense of calling and committed to pray for me. But I can't say that they "sent" me. It was more like they "released" me. There was no commissioning. There was no relationship of ongoing spiritual authority. I was simply set adrift into the care of a missions organization.

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Here's the thing about being released instead of sent: it's normal practice. It's what most churches have done for decades—allowing missions organizations to play the central role in global missions. So what's the big deal? Why should a lead pastor care? Because the Scriptures that he preaches calls him and his church to something very different.

## A Little Example

One of the most meaningful examples of missionary care in the New Testament is tucked away in the little letter of 3 John. In this brief correspondence, the apostle John rejoiced that his friend Gaius was "walking in the truth" (v. 3). How was Gaius walking in the truth? In this instance by caring for itinerant missionaries who had passed through his church. We read,

*Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore, we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth. —3 John 5-8*

One of the most remarkable (and easily missed!) lines in the passage sets the bar for our ongoing care of missionaries, especially those we've sent from among our own church members. We are to do so "in a manner worthy of God." Consider this: if Jesus Himself were to come to your church and ask you to send Him out, how would you do it?

By rolling out the red carpet!



You would be eager to provision Him with whatever He needed and support Him by any means necessary. It would be a great joy and privilege!

And *that* is the bar. That is the standard that John sets for us in all of our ongoing care of missionaries: sending them in a manner worthy of God Himself. And in doing so, John says, we become "fellow workers for the truth," active participants in global missions.

## Becoming the Example

Ironically, after experiencing the strange lack of care and accountability from the local church as a missionary, I came home and began serving as a missions pastor. Suddenly on the front lines of missionary care, I was committed to helping our missionaries have a better experience than I had, and to helping the church be more faithful to its biblical role than mine had been. It was hard, but it made for a healthier church, healthier missionaries,

and ultimately more fruitful ministry among the nations. It was at this time through the ministry of The Upstream Collective that I wrote a book called *The Sending Church Defined* to help other churches do the same.

A few years later God then saw fit for me to begin serving as a lead pastor at Antioch Church. Antioch is a small congregation (around 100 members) with an abnormally large number of “distributed members.”

This is the term we use for our missionaries in order to communicate their ongoing church membership, and how we are still bound to one another. As of the writing of this article, 17% of Antioch’s members are serving overseas.

Although this is outwardly impressive, it creates a unique dilemma for a lead pastor, especially in a church where I am the only full-time staff member. Antioch has committed to *a lot* of ongoing missionary care. What is my role in that, especially in light of my many other biblical responsibilities? Allow me to outline it in a way that is useful to any lead pastor in any church setting.

**Champion the vision.** One of the primary responsibilities of a lead pastor is preaching God’s word. This is where the particular vision of a local church is birthed and fueled. As a natural part of his preaching and visionary leadership, the lead pastor can champion the church’s role in global missions and, specifically, in missionary care. This can come from expository series through books (such as 3 John, Acts, and Philippians), through topical sermons about global missions, and/or through occasional missionary care related examples within sermons. At Antioch we call these emphases “Sending Sundays” and try to make them happen every few months.

**Build the relationship.** I have found that at the heart of pastoral care is relationship. In fact, the Bible teaches that pastors will one day give an account to Jesus for the souls under their care (Hebrews 13:17). Although I know that lead pastors cannot have a deep relationship with every church member, they *can* seek to be available and relatable. This must be especially so with missionaries. If at all possible, seek to develop a relationship with missionary candidates before they are sent. If that’s not possible, then take the initiative to connect with them virtually, or share a meal when they come to visit. And once the relationship is established,



remind them occasionally that you're still there for them. I have a notification set on my calendar to text a missionary every few weeks.

**Develop a team.** Whether a church has one missionary or a dozen, take my advice: don't try to do it all yourself! Caring well for the soul of a missionary means attending to their many unique needs. These include finances, prayer, accountability and the catch-all category of logistical support. Although a missions organization may assist with many of these needs, there will still be plenty of gaps. Lead pastors do well to raise up a team of church members to be the primary support link between the church and the missionary. At Antioch we call this the "missionary care team." They handle all the day to day communication and needs, and let me know when I need to get involved.

Although the above three steps are the most critical part of the lead pastor's role in missionary care, here are a few more worthy of brief mention:

- **Organize a commissioning.** Care for them by making a big deal of their sending, and by publicly clarifying what the church and the missionary are committing to one another. Put the commitment in writing and be specific.
- **Share the stage.** Anytime missionaries visit, give them prime time on stage to report to the church "all that God has done with them" (Acts 14:27). Welcome them to talk about not just the victories, but also the struggles.
- **Go visit them.** One of the most tangible, life-changing, pastor-changing, church-changing acts of missionary care is to visit them on the field. It may be hard to step away from responsibilities, but it will be worth it!

Whatever steps you put in place, just don't be like Chuck, who assumed that Wilson would never drift away from the boat. For each missionary you commit to care for, resolve to bind them to yourself, so that you and your church may send them in a manner worthy of God. In this way, you will truly be fellow workers for the truth. 

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