

The Local Church: Failure, Foe, or Friend in the Great Commission?

By Paul Borthwick

Michael wants to go into cross-cultural ministry, to go to a Muslim country in North Africa in a tent-making capacity. We were catching up on the events of the past few months since he graduated from college.

In the course of the conversation, I asked what I thought was a fair question: "Michael, if you desire to go overseas as one of our missionaries, why haven't you been involved in some aspect of the ministry?"

I expected comments about his being newly graduated or not knowing where to help or being too busy. I got something else.

"Well," Michael replied, his eyes widening as he got agitated, "this church – all churches that I know of – doesn't care about the Great Commission. All I see are people who are self-centered and preoccupied with their own pet peeves like the time of the services, whether or not there is child care, and improving the church grounds, with very little interest in winning the world for Christ."

Michael's countenance changed from anger to shame. He had spoken his mind, but had forgotten that he was talking to the minister of missions, who represented both the "self-centered" people and the funding that he needed to go overseas. I think he expected me to defend my case.

Instead, I simply replied, "Michael, I cannot disagree with your observations, although I think you have overlooked some fine people and churches. But this is exactly why I asked for your involvement. We need people like you to be catalysts towards greater missions involvement while you are here. You see, Michael, whether we like to admit it or not, the local church is primary in God's worldwide purposes." In my conversation with Michael, I pointed out the primacy of the local church in the Great Commission by highlighting four truths.

Truth #1: The local church is primary in world missions because Jesus said it is.

The promise of Jesus to Peter (Matthew 16:18) states that he will build His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. The image is one of a forceful organization of believers representing one Kingdom on the march against another. When the gates of that second kingdom – hell – are attacked, they will fall.

Who is supposed to be on this attack? Jesus says it's His Church. For each of us, this manifests itself in the local assembly of believers. The church fails in its task when it loses the mentality of advancement.

The local church that is a foe to world missions or a failure in doing its part in the Great Commission has usually degenerated from being a "Kingdom-advancer" to a "fortress-

builder." Rather than taking new ground for Christ, we spend our time protecting the ground we have.

The missions-minded person who sees this happening in his or her local church should get involved and try to influence the church's thinking. Without our involvement, the local church will plunge deeper into a fortress mentality, the missions-minded will become more cynical about the local church, and we all will move further from Jesus' promise that his Church will defeat the gates of hell.

Advancing Churches in Missions Commitment (ACMC) published a book entitled *The Local Church Can Change the World*. The title is not some vain wish, but rather a statement in keeping with the vision that Jesus has for His Church.

Truth #2: The local church is primary because the body of Christ is there.

Peer groups and campus fellowships can be wonderful stimuli towards discipleship and missions, but they do not present the whole cross-section of the body of Christ.

Michael was correct in his evaluation of some Christians as being petty in their self-centeredness and being opposed to the Great Commission. But these people are still members of Christ's body, the Church. If we are to be faithful to Him, we must be faithful to them by seeking to love and serve them in our desire to help them expand their world views.

The fuller representation of the body of Christ we call the local church also puts us in the presence of older believers whose accumulated wisdom will be our training ground for realistic ministry – in this culture or another.

Truth #3: The local church is primary because it affords us training and care.

Do you have the patience needed to persevere for years in a Muslim culture without seeing anyone become a Christian? No one really knows, but ministry to the junior-highers at the local church can certainly help develop patience.

And will you desire to lead people in another culture to Christ, disciple them, and encourage them to be "world Christians?" If you plan to do this, you should take every opportunity to test your skills, methods, and relational abilities right in your own church.

Local church training may be formal – missions evangelism training, candidate programs, or teacher training. But the more valuable training may be the informal character training that comes from loving the unlovely people at church, persevering with those that are belligerently anti-missions, or listening to the rebukes from elders at the church.

The pre-field formal and informal training is essential in helping potential missionaries get sent to the field by local churches, but the ongoing care that a local church can give will help keep the missionary on the field.

Every missionary suffers at times from the "Does anyone know I'm here?" syndrome. Missionaries who receive letters, packages, or calls from a caring home church are glad for the relationships established in the sending church before they left.

Mission Issues

Truth #4: The local church is primary because it is both the beginning and the end of missions.

In his book *A People for His Name*, Dr. Paul Beals identifies a three-part cycle in the book of Acts regarding the missions effort:

1. Evangelizing non-believers.
2. Edifying the saints.
3. Establishing churches.

As soon as a church was established, the cycle resumed: evangelizing – edifying – establishing. The problem of established churches is that we perceive ourselves as being the end of the cycle, but not as the beginning of a new cycle, i.e. the fortress mentality again.

Some, like my friend Michael, want to circumvent the church and be involved only at another part of the cycle (evangelizing or edifying), but they fail to see the fact that evangelizing should emanate from the church and edifying should lead to the establishment of churches.

Another way to put this same truth: One of the basic purposes of any missionary endeavor is to establish local, indigenous congregations of believers. These new congregations – like the ones out of which we come – may also suffer from self-centeredness, erroneous priorities, or a fortress mentality for although the cultural forms may differ, people are sinners in every culture! The best way to combat these errors in the future is to get experience combating them in our present local church.

Friend, Foe, or Failure?

The local church – is it friend, foe, or failure in world missions? Preparing missionaries will see it as a foe if the spirit of criticism or negativism prevails. There are plenty of problems in the local church, but it doesn't give any of us the freedom to avoid the local church to do our own thing.

Preparing missionaries, members of mission organizations, or college fellowships may see the local church as a failure in world missions, but this should call us to action, not avoidance. We should get involved and try to make the church a success in fulfilling its Christ-ordained calling.

The local church is the missionary's friend a true partner in the sending process. Jesus established it. We are part of the body of Christ, expressed in local congregations. We need the training and discipline of life in the local church because it is local churches that we go to plant.

*Rise up, people of God,
The church for you doth wait.
Her strength unequal to the task – rise up and make her great!*

Paul Borthwick wrote this article while serving as mission director at Grace Chapel in Lexington, MA.

Source: Caleb Project, n.d., 2010 Pioneers.
Please feel free to reproduce this article and share it with others.