

# The Sending Church

*“In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabus, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabus and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ So after they had fasted and prayed they placed their hands on them and sent them off.” (Acts 13:1-3)*

When you read through the Acts of the Apostles, you almost need a Trip Tik from AAA to map the way of all the journeys. This is a church on the move. It is a very unique church. It is a sending church.

Not every church could be described in this way. Many churches offer great worship, meaningful Bible studies, and Christ-centered ministry to those who enter. That is the key: “to those who enter.” The ministry is for those who enter. There is very little sending that occurs.

What are the distinguishing marks of a sending church? Look closely at the model offered in Acts 13:

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Now I know the temptation is to whiz through those names. Just another list of tough names to pronounce. There is, however, some great insight to be gained by looking closer. These men involved in ministry and teaching were quite a mixed group, to say the least. Barnabus was from the island of Cyprus. Simeon was also named Niger, which is a Latin term meaning “black skinned.” Lucius was from Cyrene, which was west of Egypt on the coast of Africa. His name was Greek, and so there is the strong possibility

that he was a Gentile. Manaen was a member of high society, having grown up with Herod the tetrarch. Then there is Saul with all of his credentials in education and rabbinical training. Right there in the middle of multi-cultural and urban Antioch, the Roman capital of Syria, is a church with a leadership team that reflects the community that surrounds it.

*“While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting.”* This community was marked by worshiping and fasting. The discipline of fasting is not practiced by many today. It does, however, have deep roots within Scripture.

*“Fasting confirms our utter dependence upon God by finding in him a source of sustenance beyond food. Through it, we learn by experience that God’s word to us is a life substance, that it is not food alone that gives life, but also the words that proceed from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4).*

We learn that we too have meat to eat that the world does not know about (John 4: 32, 34). Fasting unto our Lord is therefore feasting—feasting on Him and on doing His will (Willard, p. 166).

This simple reference to worshiping and fasting reveals a church that humbly depends not on its own resources and ideas, but on God’s Word to guide them. It is of no surprise then that, in the midst of this, the Holy Spirit

gives them specific guidance as to what they should do. Sending churches wait on the Lord, expecting to be guided by His will.

*“Set apart for me Barnabus and Saul for the work to which I have called them. So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.”*

Sending churches are not possessive. They are willing to let go of some of their best leaders if this is the will of God. Prompted by the Spirit, they first pray and fast again. There is the need within them to make sure this is of God. Confirmed in this, they send off two strong leaders so that the Word about Christ can spread to the outer most parts of the world.

Sending churches are not selfish about their resources. They are willing to share for the sake of the kingdom. They understand and follow the encouragement of John when he said to another church,

*“Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth” (3 John 5-8).*

This is one of the many things that I have so respected about St. Luke. Over the years, this congregation has been willing to send out its staff and give ten percent of paid staff time for work in the Kingdom at large. This attitude of unselfishness is a blessing to the Kingdom and a reflection of the Triune God Himself.

The very nature of God, who is the Head of the Church, is that He is a sending God. Everything about God is outward. The opposite of God would be sin, where everything is turned inward on self. Think about the Triune God for a moment. The

Father says, “Look at my Son; isn’t He something?” Jesus says, “I am here to do the Father’s will and bring glory to Him.” The Spirit comes to bear witness and testimony not to Himself but to Jesus. Everything about God is outward and focused on others, including you and me.

*“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son. . . .”*

The very foundation of the Old Testament Church reflects this outward, sending movement of God. Look at the life of Abraham or Moses and you will see God sending them out to strange lands or into Egypt to free His people. God does not sit still. Nor does His Church.

Should it surprise us, then, that following Pentecost, God seeks to send His Church into the world? When they are slow on the take to do that, God allows for the persecution of Christians, forcing their hand to go out into the remote parts of the world.

At the center of mission is the sense that life is to be lived away from ourselves. Mission involves the willingness to leave our comfort zone, knowing that where we go, we take with us the Comforter, the Holy Spirit.

Sending churches do not seek to raise up members as much as they seek to raise up missionaries—those who live as Jesus did, with an awareness that they are sent. Sending churches operate with a different scorecard in measuring their effectiveness. Rather than asking how many people were seated in church on a Sunday, they are asking how many people were sent out as missionaries. Reggie McNeal puts it this way:

*“A missionary church culture will need to begin keeping score on things different from what we measure now. These may include how many ministry initiatives we are establishing in the streets, how many conversations we are having with pre-Christians, how many volunteers we are releasing into local and global mission projects aimed*

at community transformation, how many congregations are starting to reach different populations, how many congregations use our facilities, how many languages (ethnic and generational) we worship in, how many community groups use our facilities, how many church activities target people who aren't here yet, how many hours per week members spend in ministry where they work, go to school and get mail" (p. 67).

The sending church not only reflects the heart of the Trinity and the model of the Church in the Book of Acts, the sending church is evolving as a key piece in the mission strategy of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Consider these numbers:

- In 2004, seven new career missionary families were placed. That brings the total of career missionary families to 81, covering 32 countries. As more and more nationals are trained on location, fewer and fewer full-time missionaries will be needed. This is not to say that full-time will be eliminated; in fact more and more are needed in one of the largest mission fields, right here in the United States.
- In 2004, the LC-MS sent 43 short-term volunteer missionaries to fields for one week to six months of service. It is anticipated that this number will grow rapidly in the next few years.
- In 2004, 41 long-term missionaries were placed for six months to a two-year service. 78 were requested, and there are 200+ opportunities.

What does all of this tell us about the future? The money crunch that makes many wring their hands at the cutbacks may also bring about great blessing. Just as the persecution in Jerusalem forced the hand of the early Christians, so these days force us

to find alternative ways to proclaim Christ to the nations. The sending church will play a key role in fulfilling the Great Commission in the future. Sending out teams of voluntary missionaries from our midst, we follow after the example of our ancestors in the Church in Antioch two thousand years ago.

It may be that within your midst there is no one evident that could be sent at this time. There are, however, opportunities for the local church to "adopt" and support missionaries through a program in the LC-MS called "Together In Mission." More information can be found at [www.lcmsworldmission.org](http://www.lcmsworldmission.org) or calling 1-800-248-1930.

What would it take for your congregation to become more of a sending church? What are the marks of that church in Acts 13 that characterize your church right now? In prayer, ask God for His guidance and empowerment to make this more of a present reality. In conversation, speak with other members and the leaders as to what steps can be taken to move toward this in your ministry. Those who belong to a sending church or who desire to see their church become one will be open to either being asked to be the one sent out or then staying behind and releasing others to go, supporting them with their prayers and offerings.

The sending church is not the work of a few, but the ministry of the entire Body. The sending church understands that it is not about them. It is about God. It is His ministry. It is His mission. The Spirit said to those gathered in Antioch, "*Set apart for me. . .*" The sending church understands that everything they do and everything they possess is for Him. To God alone be the glory.

**Prayer:** O Father, Son and Holy Spirit, your very nature is to send out and give to others. May your Holy Church on Earth reflect this likeness by sending out into the world those who bear your name and message. May it be so within your Church, beginning with me today. **Amen.**

**Challenge:** What can you do to support the sending out of missionaries? Investigate ways that you and your church can support the LCMS missionary efforts through prayers, gifts or volunteers from your own congregation.

**Scripture Reading:** Acts 13

**From the Book of Concord:** ““Since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.’ Acts 11[:14]: ‘[Peter] will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ Romans 10[:17]: ‘So faith arises from the proclamation, and proclamation comes through God’s word. John 17[:17, 20]: ‘Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. I ask on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word. Therefore, the eternal Father calls from heaven regarding his dear Son and all who proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name, ‘Listen to him!’ (Matt. 17[: 5]). All who want to be saved should listen to this proclamation. For the proclamation and the hearing of God’s Word are the Holy Spirit’s tools, in, with, and through which he wills to work effectively and convert people to God and within whom he wants to effect both the desire for and the completion of their conversion” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II: Free Will, pp. 553-554.51-52).