WHAT TO DO WITH A CALL

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Category: Observations

This is the second in my series looking at the role of churches in sending missionaries. Today, I'd like to take a quick look at what you should do when someone comes to you saying that they have a call to mission.

OK, the first thing you should do is read my definitive post on the missionary call, which looks at the notion of the call from the point of view of the individual who senses a call. Viewed from the other side of the pastor's desk, what are the responsibilities of the church towards someone who "feels called"?

You are not a rubber stamp.Â There is a feeling in some mission circles that an individual's call to mission trumps everything and that if someone feels called to mission the rest of us have to get on and help them do whatever it is that they feel called to do. To use theological jargon, that's complete and utter rubbish. People can be mistaken about a mission call just as much as they can be mistaken about anything else. If someone says they have a call to mission, take them seriously, but don't automatically assume they are right.

Discernment is key. Your role as a church leader is to help the person discern whether their call is genuine, is just a nice idea, a spiritualised desire to travel or something else entirely. There are three key reasons why it is important to take this discernment role seriously.

- *For the sake of the individual*. Mission work isn't all smiley faces and cuddling orphans, whatever the agency brochures might suggest. It can be tough, lonely, disorientating and downright difficult. You don't want to put someone in that position if it isn't right for them. It can take years of training and significant financial and other sacrifices to get someone to the mission field - it can be very, very difficult if after all of that they crash and burn. Saying "no" to a potential missionary candidate may be the best thing you can do.

- *For the sake of the field*. Having been a mission leader both in the UK and in Africa, I am aware of how much emotional, spiritual and physical energy is drained by interacting with people who should, in all probability, never have been accepted as missionaries in the first place. Some people expect the world to revolve around them, others just don't have the get up and go to prosper in a different culture and others don't have the maturity needed for mission life. Still others cause major problems for the local church because of the way they interact. Do your brothers and sisters on the field a favour and don't export your problems to them!
- *For the sake of your church*. If you accept someone as a mission partner, you may end up supporting them for years or even decades. Mission is a long-term business and you shouldn't commit your church to something if you are not sure that it is the right thing. It might seem a nice idea to say that you will support someone - but how will your successor feel about it in fifteen years time?

So how do you discern whether someone has a call? My post yesterday has some ideas and I'll be

saying more about a church's approach to mission in the next day or two and these might help. However, as in all things, I think it's worth turning to the Scriptures. We are told in Acts 9 that Paul was God's chosen messenger to take the gospel to the Gentiles. However, it isn't until Acts 13 that he and Barnabas were actually commissioned for missionary work - and that happened as the leaders worshipped, fasted and prayed. You can have lists of things that you expect from potential mission-partners, but in the end, you have to be in tune with what the Holy Spirit is saying. Take your time, and pray!

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