

POSTINGS

articles for missions mobilizers



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Smaller Churches Make Great Missionary Senders!

**Relationship, not size,
is what matters**

Numerically smaller congregations can excel in missionary sending specifically because they are small, not in spite of it! While some of our *Postings* issues feature ideas from larger congregations with more resources, experience has proven that smaller churches are often the most engaged with their global workers. If you are part of a smaller congregation, this issue is all about celebrating you and your unique ability to walk alongside global workers.

Postings is talking this month to Tim Hood, president of Shepherd's Staff, an organization that very intentionally assists local churches

of all sizes in sending global workers. We caught up with him to find out why he's enthusiastic about small-church sending potential.

Q. The definition of a small church may vary depending where you live. Tim, how would you define a small church and why do you believe they have potential?

A. I love this topic because I deeply appreciate the role of small churches. I was sent out to be an overseas missionary by a small church, so I know very personally what it's like to be sent and cared for by a smaller congregation.

I want to emphasize that when we refer to smaller churches, we only mean they are numerically small. These folks are mighty in spirit and have big hearts. That being said, it is helpful to define what size we are talking about. At Shepherd's Staff, we consider a church of 300 or less to be a smaller church.

Q. What are some general characteristics or attitudes that you find in small churches that would set them apart from larger churches? What strengths do they bring?

A. One of the strengths of smaller churches that blessed me most when I was serving overseas was the intimacy. In many of the churches I was connected to, families had been worshipping together for generations and had a lot of shared experiences, including missions. For example, there was intimacy in their intercession. If they were praying for a missionary, they usually knew

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the worker's needs because often somebody in the group had just gotten an email or text or phone call from them.

Typically the small church's worship service is more flexible and that can lead to spontaneous engagement and sharing when the missionary is home. I remember instances where the pastor looked out and saw me in the congregation, and invited me on the spot to come to the front

and share. It felt very personal. I think it comes from the fact that woven into the fabric of small-church life is the conviction that church isn't an event but it's people.

Q. I'm glad you highlighted these smaller-church advantages. Per capita, it seems like smaller congregations often outperform larger ones in missions involvement. However, missionary sending can be an overwhelming task. The pastor often wears a lot of hats and can't give all the time and focus they might want to missions. Is this a handicap? Can the smaller church really be an effective sender?

A. Absolutely! In fact, some of the best sending comes from smaller churches. A larger church may find it relatively easy to commit financial support, but they may struggle to provide personalized care. In contrast, the smaller church might struggle to provide the financial support, but they excel at various aspects of missionary care.

Hebrews 13 tells us that pastors have watch-care over our souls. The small-church pastor's watch-care is deeply personal because everyone shares life together in community. That rich community life can extend overseas. Caring well for

everybody in the church includes those who are abroad.

Yet it's easy for a small-church pastor who has to fill so many roles to be overwhelmed by caring for their congregation even without adding on responsibility for caring for missionaries. Fortunately, there are creative ways to share the load.

We are called Shepherd's Staff because we want to be a staff in

Sometimes it's even just one! We see this demonstrated in 1 Corinthians 16 where Paul speaks of the three-person care team that the Corinthians sent to make up what was lacking in their support for him. Sometimes, one of the best things a church can do is send one or two people overseas to visit a missionary—to walk with them, pray with them, and minister alongside of them in their context.

individually assess the need and the opportunity to work together. Sometimes churches have the missionary-sending pipeline figured out from A to Y. They really just need us to help them get from Y to Z, for instance with aspects like payroll, retirement, and insurance. But other churches come to us and they're still figuring out what missions is all about. That's not necessarily determined by size but by experience.

Our job is to help churches answer questions like: What does a missionary-sending pipeline look like? What books should we be reading? What podcasts should we be listening to? What other resources will help us walk with potential workers through all the steps of mobilization? How do we rally our church?

However, the place to begin—always—is developing in the church a higher, holier view of a God who is worthy of worship from every language, people, tribe, and nation. When a church catches that vision, whether it's a congregation of 60 or 6,000, they have to respond. They are compelled to do something.

It's a privilege to walk alongside a church of any size in living out their response to a God worthy of all worship. Our assistance often includes helping them to develop

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the Shepherd's hand, helping churches to guide their flock around the world. One aspect of that is encouraging churches, no matter their size, to establish care teams or advocacy teams to share the care-giving responsibility for their global workers.

These groups check in with a missionary to keep up with what's going on, ask probing questions, and identify how to pray for them. Some of the best care teams are just two or three people.

So sending does not begin and end with money. There are many ways that churches can care for their workers. Small churches can excel at that.

Q. Does a mission agency like Shepherd's Staff partner differently with a smaller church than with a large one? How does the sending collaboration look different?

A. Our conviction and practice is to meet churches where they are, to

a strategy and a plan for their sending process. It's never a one size fits all, and that's why God uses a variety of organizations like Catalyst Services and others to equip and inform, and organizations like Shepherd's Staff to help with sending. Working together we can help churches, regardless of size, to craft a plan for sending that will mobilize their congregation to obedience.

Q. What about a new church plant or a small church that is going through a lot of turmoil? They may say, "This is not the time for us to think about missions. We need to get ourselves together first. Later on when we are bigger or more stable, we can engage in missions." What do you say to that church?

A. A lot of church plants see themselves as the recipient of missions because teams come from other places to help them. However, from the very beginning a church plant needs to have infused into their DNA a commitment to being a sending church. Why? Because healthy things reproduce. So a healthy church from the start needs to believe that the Great Commission means that they're supposed to multiply, not only in their own community but also around the world.

But what does missions look like for a church in a season of transition or struggle? First, Scripture makes clear that God is working in every congregation for His glory. Every church goes through struggles, and they need to be honest about those struggles while at the same time asking how they can come alongside missionaries in their struggles. In other words, churches can ask the Lord to help them unpack and process their own difficult experiences so that what God has taught them and poured into them in times of trial actually prepares them to share the burdens and difficulties their missionary is facing. This sharing results in more effective and intentional ministry locally and globally.

Q. That's so important to remember in the tough times. And it applies to any size church. Tim, as we conclude, can you paint a picture of one case in which you've partnered with a small church that's been effective in sending and supporting their workers overseas?

A. Calvary Shoreline in California and Movement Church in Virginia are two examples of smaller churches that have really owned the missionary-sending task. They have maintained and developed

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deeply personal relationships with their sent missionaries. They don't see them as former members but rather as an extension of the church.

A couple from one of these churches was serving in a very high conflict area during a lot of civil unrest. As an organization Shepherd's Staff had a responsibility for their wellbeing and safety. We discussed both evacuation options and what it would take to safely stay in place. But that's not a conversation we would ever want to have in isolation, and we didn't. Their church never assumed that was just our responsibility as their agency. Even though they are a relatively small congregation,

they were deeply involved in thinking and praying through the options with us. They were ready to help financially, assist with member care, and provide encouragement.

I love the metaphor of the church holding the rope as their missionary climbs in dangerous places. In this case, this smaller church was committed to holding the rope for their workers through the entire situation.

They understood that if they let it go, their missionaries were going to fall. The relationship was critically important, and the church never let go of the rope.

Q. That's so encouraging! It's all about commitment, not size. Do you have any closing thoughts to encourage the leaders of smaller churches?

A. Jesus talked a lot about sheep and seeds in His teachings throughout the gospels. Neither seeds nor sheep

are known for being strong or robust. Yet seeds can produce a mighty harvest and sheep produce mighty benefits—from wool to meat to milk. Through these metaphors, Jesus was demonstrating that He does big things and is glorified through what might seem little.



Tim Hood is president & CEO of Shepherd's Staff, a missions facilitating organization dedicated to equipping local churches to send their own members as missionaries. Prior to joining the Shepherd's Staff team in early 2021, Tim spent 20 years in missions mobilization, coaching, and training. He also served in the Middle East and North Africa. Tim and his family now live in Knoxville, TN.

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