

MISSIO NEXUS MOBILIZATION RESEARCH SERIES

Church Partnership in Missionary Sending:

From Theory to Practice

Based on structured interviews with mobilization leaders from 18+ mission organizations and analysis of the 2025 Launch Survey (2,400+ respondents)

Mark Harris, Researcher | Prepared for Missio Nexus Member Organizations

Introduction: The Church at the Center

The local church is not a partner in missionary sending—it is the sender. Mission agencies do not send missionaries; they facilitate, equip, and support the sending that properly belongs to the gathered people of God. This distinction, while seemingly semantic, carries profound implications for how agencies conduct mobilization, how they relate to churches, and ultimately how missionaries fare on the field.

Yet in practice, many agencies have drifted toward treating the church as a reference provider—a source of letters, endorsements, and financial support—rather than as the primary ecclesial community from which missionaries are sent and to which they remain accountable. The consequences of this drift are measurable: higher attrition, weaker support networks, greater isolation on the field, and candidates who arrive inadequately prepared for the spiritual and relational demands of cross-cultural ministry.

This paper explores the theology and practice of genuine church-agency partnership in missionary sending. It draws on structured interviews with mobilization leaders from 18+ mission organizations, survey data from 2,400+ respondents in the 2025 Launch Survey, and qualitative feedback from current missionaries about what they wish had been different in their preparation and sending processes. The findings are consistent: organizations that treat church partnership as non-negotiable from the beginning produce better-prepared missionaries, more robust support networks, and significantly improved field retention.

One mobilization leader summarized what many expressed across interviews:

"The church is sending. We are partnering with them in the sending. If you're going to work with an agency like ours, then the implication is that you care about the church. You can't be an island—you have to be connected to the church, and God's calling you through his church." —
Agency Mobilization Director

This paper is organized around five sections: the theological foundation for church primacy in sending; practical assessment of church buy-in during the mobilization process; building genuine partnership throughout the candidate journey; navigating

situations where church partnership is weak or absent; and practical tools organizations use to strengthen church relationships.

Part 1: Theological Foundation

The Church as Primary Sender

The New Testament pattern of missionary sending is unambiguously ecclesial. In Acts 13:1–3, the Holy Spirit directed the church at Antioch to set apart Barnabas and Saul, and it was the church—fasting, praying, and laying hands on them—that sent them out. This was not an organizational deployment. It was a covenantal act of the gathered body, releasing members of their own community for the sake of peoples who had not heard the gospel.

This pattern matters for contemporary mobilization because it establishes accountability, community, and covenantal responsibility as native to missionary sending—not optional add-ons. When a church sends a missionary, that church takes responsibility for that person's spiritual formation and wellbeing before departure, prayerful and financial support during service, a community to return to during furlough and at the end of service, and pastoral accountability throughout.

The agency, in this framework, serves a different but essential function: providing field expertise, logistical infrastructure, legal protection in host countries, member care systems, field community, and organizational accountability. What the agency cannot provide—and what no agency should attempt to substitute for—is the covenantal community from which a person was called and to which they belong.

"Fundamentally, it's a theology of the church, the missionary, the sending church, and the mission agency relationship. A sending church helps you work through the challenges of pre-field as it relates to your spiritual maturity, your calling, whether you're walking in your gifting. Those are things that, as a mission agency, it's hard for us to help you discern—and hard for us to ultimately affirm. We want the sending church to be a part of that." —Agency Mobilization Director

Historical Context: The Parachurch Drift

The modern mission movement produced remarkable fruit while also, in some cases, inadvertently displacing the local church. As mission agencies professionalized in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they developed increasingly sophisticated systems for candidate assessment, training, and deployment. Churches, many of which lacked the expertise, networks, and infrastructure to facilitate cross-cultural missionary service, delegated increasing responsibility to agencies.

By the late twentieth century, many agencies operated essentially independently of local churches, treating church connection as a checkmark in the candidate file rather than as the organizing covenantal relationship of missionary service. Missionaries were deployed by organizations, supported by organizations, member cared for by

organizations, and related to the receiving field through organizations. The local church faded from a sender to a supporting partner to, in some cases, little more than a venue for furlough presentations.

The consequences were not immediately obvious. Missionaries still went to the field, support was raised, ministries were conducted. But as field attrition data emerged and retention challenges mounted, a consistent theme appeared in exit interviews and surveys: missionaries who left the field prematurely often cited isolation, insufficient community support, and lack of connection to a home community that knew them deeply and held them accountable with genuine pastoral care.

The contemporary recovery of church-agency partnership represents one of the healthiest developments in evangelical missiology. Organizations represented in this research are rethinking the agency's role—not as the primary institutional home of the missionary, but as a partner organization serving both the sending church and the receiving mission context. This theological recovery is producing measurable improvements in candidate preparation, support network strength, and field retention.

Why This Matters for Mobilization Effectiveness

The theological argument for church-centered sending is not merely academic—it has direct practical consequences for every dimension of mobilization effectiveness. Survey data from the 2025 Launch Survey reveals that candidates with strong church partnerships navigate the mobilization journey differently than those without. They are better prepared spiritually, having experienced substantive pastoral investment and community accountability. They raise support more effectively, having a primary community that knows and endorses them. They navigate obstacles with greater resilience, carrying community support beyond any single organizational connection.

One organization's mobilization leader observed that the single most predictive variable in long-term field retention is the quality of church partnership at the time of departure: organizations reporting highest retention rates treat church partnership as non-negotiable from the beginning. Those that attempt to send candidates without it typically experience attrition either before departure or within the first term.

The 2025 Launch Survey asked current missionaries what advice they would give to mission organizations. Strong church partnership emerged as a recurring theme, with multiple respondents noting that the longer they served on the field, the more convinced they became of the church's central role. One missionary wrote:

"Most of the process was about the organization. The longer I served, the more convinced I became it was the church that should have been more central." —Current Missionary, 2025 Launch Survey

Part 2: Early Assessment of Church Buy-In

The Critical Question: "What Feedback Have You Gotten from Your Pastor?"

In the discovery conversation—the first substantive interaction between a mobilizer and a candidate—high-performing organizations ask a specific question that immediately reveals the state of church connection: "What feedback have you gotten from your pastor?" This open-ended question is deceptively powerful. The content of the answer is important, but so is what the question itself reveals about the candidate's posture toward accountability and community.

A candidate who has discussed their missionary interest with their pastor demonstrates that they understand calling as a community process, that they are willing to submit to pastoral discernment, and that they have already taken a concrete step toward involving their church. A candidate who has not discussed it with their pastor may be pursuing missions in independence from the community where their calling should naturally surface and be affirmed. That independence, left unaddressed, often predicts future difficulty.

"That question—'What feedback have you gotten from your pastor?'—usually sets up whatever comes next. Depending on the feedback, maybe the pastor sees that they could be a good missionary but needs a little more time actually serving in the local church as a disciple-maker. Then they go into our nurture pipeline. If the pastor affirms calling and readiness, the process continues." —Senior Mobilizer

Interpreting Pastoral Responses

Organizations describe three primary categories of pastoral response, each requiring a distinct mobilization response.

The first and most favorable response is clear pastoral affirmation: the pastor believes this person is called, spiritually mature, and ready to begin the missionary sending process. When this affirmation is present, organizations typically proceed with confidence to the next stage of assessment, knowing that a crucial accountability structure is already in place.

The second response—perhaps the most common—is qualified or developmental affirmation. The pastor sees genuine potential and real calling indicators, but believes the candidate needs more time serving locally, growing in spiritual maturity, or developing specific ministry skills before entering the candidate process. This is not a rejection of the candidate's calling—it is wise pastoral investment in that calling. Organizations should honor this response by moving the candidate to a structured nurture pipeline, maintaining relationship and engagement while respecting the pastor's timeline.

The third response is the most concerning: the candidate has not spoken to their pastor, is hiding their interest from church leadership, or lacks meaningful church connection entirely. These situations signal that something is fundamentally misaligned. Either the

candidate is pursuing missions in independence from their covenant community, or they lack the community foundation from which genuine missionary service flows. Effective organizations pause the process in these cases—not to punish the candidate, but to help them do the foundational work that will make their eventual sending far more fruitful.

"Those attempting to send candidates without church affirmation typically experience attrition either before departure or within the first term. We've learned this the hard way." —Mobilization Director

When Church Affirmation Is Absent

The discovery that a candidate lacks meaningful church connection or pastoral support creates a pastoral opportunity for the mobilizer. Rather than immediately halting the process or providing a bureaucratic explanation, effective mobilizers enter a coaching conversation about the importance of church community for missionary formation and long-term field effectiveness.

This conversation might explore several questions: Why is this candidate not connected to a church? If they are connected but haven't discussed their missionary interest with their pastor, what prevents that conversation? If their church lacks a missions culture, how might they help cultivate one? What would it look like to build the kind of church relationship that could genuinely send and support them?

Organizations report that candidates who take this work seriously—who invest in building genuine church relationships before entering the formal candidate process—arrive better prepared and more resilient than those who are simply required to produce a letter. The goal is not a document but a relationship, not compliance but community.

One leader articulated a helpful framework: if a candidate responds to the church conversation with curiosity and willingness to do the work, that itself is a positive indicator of the kind of coachability that predicts field success. If they respond with resistance or dismissiveness toward church authority, that resistance often reflects deeper patterns that will surface under the pressures of cross-cultural ministry.

Helping Candidates Build Church Relationships

For candidates who need to develop their church connections, organizations offer varying levels of guidance. Some provide specific frameworks for how to approach their pastor about missionary interest—how to open the conversation, what to ask, how to invite the church into their discernment process. Others connect candidates with resources about the biblical theology of sending, helping them understand why church partnership is not merely organizational policy but theological conviction.

IMB, which partners closely with Southern Baptist churches, describes a developmental pathway for candidates not yet ready to enter the formal process: they work with local churches to establish pathways for interested candidates to grow in ministry engagement, short-term experience, and spiritual formation before the formal candidacy process begins. This church-based development pipeline, rather than an agency-run pre-pipeline, keeps the church at the center of early formation.

The goal throughout is to help candidates understand that the agency's requirement of church connection is not bureaucratic gatekeeping—it is a gift. Having a community that prays for you, holds you accountable, and knows your story deeply is among the most valuable assets a missionary can possess. Organizations that communicate this well see candidates embrace church partnership rather than comply with it grudgingly.

Part 3: Building Partnership Throughout the Process

The Shift from Reference to Relationship

Many agencies still use "reference letter" as the primary form of church engagement in the candidate process. While letters serve documentary purposes, they represent a minimal and often inadequate form of church partnership. The letter signals that the church knows the candidate; it does not necessarily indicate that the church is actively partnering in their preparation, that church leadership understands and has endorsed the mission, or that structures exist for ongoing accountability and support.

High-performing organizations distinguish between churches that are genuinely sending and churches that are providing a reference. The distinction is not always obvious from a letter, which is why these organizations communicate directly and substantively with sending church leadership throughout the process—not just at the beginning when letters are collected.

East-West Ministries describes a document they created to facilitate this shift: a comprehensive partnership resource shared with sending churches that outlines the role of the church, the role of East-West, and the role of the missionary, along with a partnership agreement and pastoral resources about the organization's theology and ministry approach. This document has been, in their assessment, a significant factor in building genuine partnership with sending churches.

"The process and documents we created to partner well with the sending church have been absolutely critical—a huge win for our team over the last couple of years. We have a document that outlines the role of the church, the role of East-West, the role of the missionary. It has a partnership agreement, more information that a pastor might want to know about us. That tool has been really helpful to set the stage for healthy partnership." —East-West Mobilization Leader

Communication with Sending Churches

Organizations with the strongest church partnerships communicate regularly with sending church leadership throughout the candidate process—not just requesting information but providing updates, inviting questions, and treating the pastor and church leadership as genuine partners in the assessment and preparation of their member.

Frequency and content of communication varies by organization and by the depth of existing relationship, but several principles emerge from research. First, communication should be bidirectional: agencies should not only send updates but actively solicit the

church's observations about the candidate's spiritual growth, ministry effectiveness, and readiness. Pastors who know a candidate deeply often perceive things that are invisible to the agency, which only sees the candidate in the specific context of candidate assessment.

Second, communication should be honest. Organizations that communicate only positive developments and avoid difficult conversations with sending churches do both the candidate and the church a disservice. When genuine concerns arise in assessment—questions about readiness, character issues, relational patterns—churches need to be involved as partners in addressing them, not protected from information they need to fulfill their pastoral responsibility.

Third, communication should anticipate the church's need for education. Many churches, even those with genuine missions commitment, lack detailed understanding of what the candidate process involves, what the organization expects of sending churches, or what challenges the candidate is likely to face in preparation and on the field. Proactive education serves both the church and the candidate.

Involving Church Leadership in Assessment

Several organizations in the research involve sending church leadership directly in formal assessment conversations—inviting pastors or church leaders to participate in elements of the candidate evaluation, share their observations about the candidate's spiritual life and ministry effectiveness, and engage with the agency's assessment findings. This involvement serves multiple purposes simultaneously.

For the candidate, having their church leaders present in the assessment process reinforces the communal nature of calling and affirms that the church is genuinely engaged in their sending—not just providing documentation. This often deepens the candidate's sense of being sent rather than simply processed.

For the church, direct involvement in assessment builds ownership of the sending relationship. Churches that have participated in evaluating a candidate feel responsible for that candidate in a way that churches who merely provided a letter often do not. This sense of responsibility translates into more robust prayer support, more intentional financial commitment, and more attentive pastoral care during preparation and on the field.

For the agency, church leadership input often surfaces important information about the candidate that might not appear in assessments conducted only by the organization. Pastors who have observed a candidate over years, in community, under pressure, and in various ministry contexts, have invaluable perspective that supplements the agency's more concentrated evaluation.

Church Role in Support Raising

Support raising is among the most challenging dimensions of pre-field preparation, and the candidate's sending church is the most important community in that process. Organizations consistently observe that candidates with genuine church buy-in raise support more effectively and with greater resilience than those lacking it.

The mechanism is straightforward: a church that truly believes in a candidate's calling and has invested in their preparation will mobilize prayer and financial support with genuine conviction. Church members who know the candidate personally, who have observed their ministry, who have participated in sending services, are far more likely to provide meaningful ongoing support than acquaintances or strangers appealing to abstract missions commitment.

Organizations can strengthen this dimension of church partnership in several ways. First, by helping candidates present their vision effectively within their home church context—not as a fundraising pitch but as an invitation to participate in kingdom work the church is already engaged in. Second, by educating churches about support raising as a ministry practice rather than a fundraising necessity—helping churches understand that their financial and prayer partnership is itself a form of participation in the missionary's field work. Third, by helping candidates navigate the delicate dynamics of asking their home community—many of whom they know personally—for long-term financial commitment.

The 2025 Launch Survey reveals that support raising is the most frequently cited challenge in the mobilization journey, with candidates consistently noting that they were unprepared for the timeline (1–3 years rather than the 6 months often communicated), the emotional demands, and the skill development required. A stronger church partnership does not eliminate these challenges, but it provides a more robust community through which they can be navigated.

Pre-Field Training That Includes the Church

One of the most significant organizational shifts observed in high-performing agencies is the intentional inclusion of sending churches in pre-field training. Rather than treating pre-field preparation as an agency responsibility conducted separately from the church, these organizations design training experiences that engage the church as a participant and partner.

Practical expressions of this vary. Some organizations provide curriculum that candidates work through within their home church context, under the supervision of their pastor or a designated church mentor, rather than in standalone agency training programs. Others organize retreats or training intensives to which sending church leadership is invited, ensuring that pastors understand what their member is learning and can provide continuity of investment after the training concludes. Some build explicit church-engagement requirements into their pre-field training curricula—projects or conversations that candidates must complete with church leaders, creating structured points of integration between agency training and church community.

Launch Global embeds candidates in structured nine-month discipleship cohorts that intentionally include community formation, spiritual development, and practical ministry skills—but they partner with specific churches whose congregations provide the community context within which this formation occurs. The result is a pre-field preparation process that is both relationally grounded and practically rigorous.

Accountability Structures on the Field

Genuine sending extends beyond departure. The sending church's relationship with the missionary does not end when the plane takes off—it enters a new phase that requires intentional structures to sustain. Organizations facilitating healthy church-missionary relationship throughout field service report better field outcomes and, critically, better reintegration when missionaries return.

Practical accountability structures on the field vary by organization and by the capacity of sending churches. Some organizations formalize the sending church's accountability role through explicit agreements specifying that the church will maintain regular contact (quarterly calls, annual visits where possible), pray for the missionary by name in corporate gatherings, communicate regularly about prayer needs and ministry developments, and provide pastoral care during furloughs and crises.

Others take a softer approach, encouraging rather than requiring ongoing church engagement, while providing resources that help churches understand how to maintain meaningful relationship across geographic and cultural distance. Whatever the approach, the underlying conviction is consistent: the missionary remains a member of the sending church throughout their field service, not merely a supported affiliate of the agency.

Current missionaries surveyed consistently note that the quality of sending church relationship significantly affects their field experience. Those with engaged sending churches report greater resilience in difficulty, better access to pastoral care, and stronger sense of identity and calling. Those whose sending church relationship faded after departure describe a kind of double displacement—serving cross-culturally while also losing their home community connection.

Part 4: When Church Partnership Is Weak or Absent

Red Flags and Warning Signs

Mobilizers develop pattern recognition over time for candidates whose church connection is more apparent than real. Several warning signs emerge consistently from interviews with experienced mobilizers.

The candidate who is enthusiastic about missions but vague about their church is among the most common. They express genuine passion for cross-cultural ministry, they have read mission biographies, they may have participated in short-term trips—but their description of their church is thin, their involvement is minimal, and their relationship with their pastor is formal at best. This candidate has formed a vision of missionary service that is essentially individual, and they have not yet understood that authentic calling is forged and tested in covenantal community.

The candidate hiding their missionary interest from church leadership represents a different concern. Whether out of fear of discouragement, a desire to have things further advanced before involving the church, or a general pattern of avoiding accountability

relationships, this candidate has effectively decided that the agency's assessment matters more than their church's. Organizations that send candidates in this condition typically experience the eventual emergence of that independence dynamic on the field, where accountability relationships are even harder to maintain.

The candidate whose pastor is not supportive—and who interprets that lack of support as the pastor being unspiritual or overly cautious—presents yet another pattern. Occasionally pastors do misunderstand missions or apply unhelpful barriers. But more often, when a pastor expresses significant reservations about a candidate's readiness, those reservations reflect genuine pastoral observation of patterns in the candidate's life that the candidate cannot see clearly. Organizations that proceed over pastoral objection rarely find it ends well.

One mobilizer described the lesson bluntly:

"Loss of buy-in—a church ending up not getting on board during the process, or parents where a candidate backs off, or a spouse who becomes not on board—becomes a showstopper. If we could keep that from happening, we would lose fewer people." —Mobilization Director

Outcomes of Sending Without Church Partnership

The research is consistent on what happens when candidates proceed to the field without genuine church partnership: outcomes are predictably worse across multiple dimensions. Support raising is more difficult, taking longer and generating less enthusiastic participation from donors who don't know the candidate well. The financial pressures this creates add stress during an already demanding pre-field period.

Field resilience is lower. When difficulties arise—and they always arise—missionaries with weak church connections have fewer places to turn. They may reach out to the agency's member care systems, but member care professionals, however skilled, cannot substitute for a community that has known a person for years, prays for them by name, and holds them with genuine pastoral love. Missionaries without that community are more vulnerable to discouragement, burnout, and early departure.

Reintegration after field service is more difficult. Missionaries without strong sending church connections often struggle to find their footing when returning home, whether for furlough or permanently. They have served in a context that has changed them profoundly, and they return to a home community that has continued its own trajectory without them—and that may not know how to receive them well. Strong sending church relationships, actively maintained during field service, significantly ease these transitions.

The 2025 Launch Survey captures the cumulative weight of these experiences in the voice of current and returning missionaries who consistently identified stronger church involvement as the single change that would most have improved their preparation and field experience.

How to Strengthen Existing Weak Partnerships

Not every candidate arrives with ideal church partnership, and not every sending church begins the process understanding its role. Mobilizers can invest in strengthening these relationships rather than simply documenting their weakness or waiting for candidates to resolve them independently.

Several practical approaches emerge from organizational experience. Direct pastor engagement—mobilizers calling or meeting with sending church pastors—communicates respect for the pastor's role and often opens conversations that candidates find difficult to initiate. These conversations can address the organization's theology of church-agency partnership, the expectations and responsibilities of the sending relationship, and the specific ways the organization hopes to support the church in its sending role.

Providing educational resources for sending churches is another high-leverage investment. Many churches want to partner well with their missionary members but lack knowledge of what genuine sending looks like in practice. Organizations that produce accessible materials helping churches understand their role—what to pray for, how to maintain meaningful connection, how to provide pastoral care at a distance, how to structure furlough visits for maximum mutual benefit—find that churches rise to the expectations set before them.

Creating sending church communities and networks helps churches that are sending missionaries for the first time or that lack experience in sustaining long-term sending relationships. When churches can share practices, learn from one another, and receive encouragement from others in similar situations, they develop confidence and capacity that benefits their missionary members.

When to Require Church Connection Before Proceeding

The research suggests a clear principle that organizations articulate differently but practice consistently: genuine church partnership is not optional, and candidates who lack it should not proceed through the formal pipeline until it exists. The timing and form of this requirement varies, but the underlying conviction does not.

AIM states it explicitly: requiring a sending church is non-negotiable. A candidate who expresses unwillingness to build or maintain a sending church relationship has, in the organization's assessment, demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding of what missionary service is—and that misunderstanding will create problems on the field that are far harder to address than they would be before departure.

Other organizations take a more developmental approach: they continue engaging with candidates who lack church connection while simultaneously coaching them toward it, setting a clear expectation that formal candidacy cannot advance until the church relationship is established. The goal is not to disqualify candidates but to help them do the foundational work that will make their sending fruitful.

The practical implication is that mobilizers need to be comfortable with pausing processes—not abandoning candidates, but communicating clearly that the next step requires church partnership, and that the organization will continue to support the

candidate in building that partnership. This requires both conviction about the importance of church connection and pastoral skill in communicating it with grace rather than legalism.

Part 5: Practical Tools and Resources

Documents Organizations Use Successfully

Organizations that have developed strong church partnership practices typically have created specific documents that structure and facilitate those partnerships. These tools are worth developing, sharing, and refining across the broader mission community.

Partnership agreements represent one of the most widely cited tools. East-West Ministries describes a comprehensive document outlining the responsibilities of the sending church, the mission organization, and the missionary—creating shared clarity about who is responsible for what throughout the candidate process and field service. These agreements typically address communication frequency and format, financial partnership expectations, pastoral care responsibilities during field service, furlough hosting and pastoral re-engagement, and crisis response protocols.

Church role summaries—shorter, more accessible documents explaining what effective sending churches do—help churches that are new to sending understand their responsibilities without the formality of a full partnership agreement. These documents typically cover the basics of maintaining prayer focus, financial support, communication rhythms, and pastoral care from a distance.

Pastoral resource packets help sending church leaders understand the organization's theology and ministry approach, the context in which their missionary will serve, the specific challenges and opportunities of that context, and the ways the organization will support the missionary alongside the church's own pastoral investment. Well-constructed pastoral packets honor the pastor's intelligence and leadership while providing information they need to partner well.

Pre-field engagement guides help candidates understand how to involve their church in their preparation—not just what paperwork to collect, but how to invite the church into genuine participation in their missionary formation. These guides often include facilitation tools for candidates to use in presenting their calling to church leadership, conducting conversations about missionary service with small groups or congregations, and creating sending ceremonies that genuinely commission rather than merely mark departure.

Communication Templates

High-performing organizations develop standardized communication templates for different stages of the church partnership—ensuring that churches receive appropriate, timely, and consistent communication without requiring individual mobilizers to craft every message from scratch.

Initial church introduction letters establish the organization's relationship with the sending church early in the process, explaining the organization's theology of church-agency partnership, what the candidate process will involve, and what kind of engagement the organization hopes to have with the church throughout. These letters set the tone for the entire relationship and communicate respect for the church's primary role.

Progress update templates help mobilizers communicate regularly with sending churches without requiring extensive writing time. These templates typically include space for reporting the candidate's current stage in the process, specific prayer requests related to their preparation, upcoming milestones or decisions, and questions the organization has for the church. Regular, structured communication prevents the relationship from defaulting to silence punctuated only by requests for information or documentation.

Field transition communications help sending churches understand what changes when their missionary departs, how the organization will be supporting the missionary in field service, and how the church can most effectively maintain their partnership across the new distance and cultural context. These communications ideally include specific, practical guidance—not just exhortations to pray and give, but help with how to pray meaningfully, what to communicate about, and how to structure the sending church's ongoing relationship with their missionary member.

Training Resources for Churches

Several organizations are developing training materials specifically designed to help churches become more effective senders—not just candidates for missions training, but equipping church leaders in what it means to genuinely send and sustain missionaries.

Workshop curricula for sending church leadership help pastors, missions committees, and church leaders develop the skills and structures needed to sustain long-term missionary relationships. These workshops typically address the theology of sending, practical structures for ongoing support, how to conduct meaningful furlough experiences, how to pray for missionaries cross-culturally, and how to help missionary families reintegrate after field service.

Online learning resources allow churches to access training at their own pace, in formats that work within the rhythms of congregational life. Organizations that have invested in producing accessible, high-quality online resources for churches report that these investments pay significant dividends in the quality of church partnerships over time.

Sending church networks—communities of churches that are actively sending missionaries and learning from one another—represent perhaps the highest-leverage investment in church partnership development. When churches connect with other churches that are sending well, they learn faster, persist more effectively, and develop the kind of institutional confidence in sending that produces long-term missionary commitment from their congregations.

Discussion Questions for Leadership Teams

The following questions are designed for mission agency leadership teams, mobilization directors, and sending church leaders to engage with the principles in this paper:

1. **Theological Alignment:** Does your organization's stated theology of church-agency partnership match your actual practices? Where are the gaps between what you say about the church's primacy and how your mobilization process is actually structured? What would it take to close those gaps?
2. **Discovery Conversation Assessment:** Do your mobilizers ask about pastoral feedback in the discovery conversation? What happens when candidates lack church affirmation? Is there a structured pathway for coaching candidates toward genuine church partnership, or does lack of church connection simply delay or disqualify candidates without addressing the underlying issue?
3. **Partnership vs. Reference:** Be honest: does your organization treat sending churches as partners or reference providers? What specific touchpoints do you have with sending church leadership throughout the process? Do you communicate with churches about the candidate's development, or only request information from them? What would genuine ongoing partnership communication look like?
4. **Church Education and Equipping:** What resources does your organization provide to help sending churches understand their role and fulfill it well? Do you have a clear, accessible document that outlines the responsibilities of the church, your organization, and the missionary? Is this document shared proactively and discussed, or only provided when churches request it?
5. **Support Raising and Church Partnership:** How does your organization help candidates leverage their church community in support raising? Do you provide training specifically designed for engaging their home church? Do you help candidates frame support raising as inviting the church into partnership rather than requesting financial transactions?
6. **Pre-Field Training Integration:** Does your pre-field training include sending churches as participants and partners, or is it primarily an agency-run program conducted separately from church community? What would it look like to design pre-field preparation that intentionally involves and equips sending churches alongside candidates?
7. **Field-Stage Partnership:** What structures exist to maintain the sending church relationship during field service? Does your member care system include intentional coordination with sending churches? How do you help churches sustain meaningful relationship with missionaries across geographic and cultural distance? What happens to the church partnership when missionaries reach their second or third term?

8. **Weak Partnership Protocols:** Does your organization have clear, consistent protocols for candidates who lack church partnership? Do mobilizers know what to do when they discover that a candidate has no meaningful pastoral relationship or is hiding their missionary interest from their church? Is there a structured coaching pathway for addressing this, or is it handled inconsistently based on individual mobilizer judgment?
9. **Reintegration and Return:** How does your organization prepare sending churches for a missionary's eventual return—whether for furlough, career transitions, or permanent reentry? Do missionaries return to churches that are equipped to receive them and walk with them through reintegration, or do they return to churches that have continued on their own trajectory and may not know how to engage a significantly changed person?
10. **For Church Leaders:** Does your church have the capacity and intentionality to be a genuine sender, or are you primarily a reference provider? What would it take to develop the structures, practices, and theological conviction needed to send missionaries with the depth of community investment that produces long-term field fruitfulness? Who in your leadership would champion this development?

Conclusion: Recovering the Sending Church

The local church sending missionaries is not a logistical preference or a best practice—it is the pattern God designed for the spread of his gospel. The church at Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas not because the Spirit could not have sent them independently but because the Spirit works through the gathered people of God, using community to form, affirm, sustain, and receive back those who serve the nations.

Mission agencies exist to serve this sending—to provide the expertise, infrastructure, and field community that enable the church's missionaries to serve effectively in contexts the local church alone could not navigate. The agency that understands this will relate to sending churches with genuine partnership rather than organizational efficiency. It will treat pastoral affirmation as a theological necessity rather than a procedural checkpoint. It will invest in church equipping as a core mobilization function rather than a peripheral service. And it will maintain sending church relationships through field service and return rather than treating departure as the end of the church's role.

The organizations in this research that have made this shift—from treating the church as a reference provider to treating it as the primary sender—report measurably better outcomes across every dimension of mobilization effectiveness. More importantly, they report that missionaries sent this way arrive better formed, serve more resiliently, and return more whole.

This is ultimately not a strategy question but a theological one. Organizations that genuinely believe the church is the body of Christ, that missionaries are sent members

of that body, and that the Great Commission is given to the church will naturally build their mobilization practices around that conviction. The practical guidance in this paper is simply a description of what that conviction looks like when it is translated faithfully into organizational practice.

Research Base: This paper draws on structured interviews with mobilization leaders from ABWE, Action International, AIM, Avant, Compel Global, Crossworld, East-West Ministries, FIM, Globe International, Gospel Mobilization, IMB, International Friendships, Launch Global, MAF, Mesa Global, Pioneers, Send International, and Serge, as well as analysis of the 2025 Launch Survey (2,400+ respondents) and qualitative feedback from 991 field missionaries.