

# Church Partnership in Missionary Sending: From Theory to Practice

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## The Central Finding

Church partnership is not one factor among many in missionary mobilization—it is the factor most consistently associated with long-term field retention, effective support raising, and missionary resilience. Multiple organizations across this research identified it as 'the number one factor' determining successful placement and retention. Yet many agencies treat church connection as a procedural checkmark rather than a theological conviction and relational foundation.

The organizations achieving the best mobilization outcomes have made a fundamental shift: they no longer view the church as a reference provider but as the primary sender. The agency serves as a partner and facilitator of that sending. This distinction—which sounds theological but has deeply practical consequences—shapes every dimension of how they mobilize candidates.

## Why This Matters: The Biblical Pattern

In Acts 13, the Holy Spirit directed the church at Antioch to send Barnabas and Saul. The church fasted, prayed, and sent them out—not as organizational employees but as members of a covenantal community released for the sake of the nations. This pattern establishes several non-negotiables: calling is affirmed communally, accountability flows through community, and the missionary remains connected to the sending body throughout their service.

When agencies substitute themselves for this ecclesial role—becoming the primary institutional home of the missionary—the consequences are measurable: weaker support networks, greater field isolation, lower resilience under pressure, and more difficult reintegration upon return. Recovering church-centered sending is not nostalgic traditionalism; it is recovering the pattern God designed for his mission.

## Key Practices from High-Performing Organizations

### 1. The Pastoral Question in the Discovery Conversation

Top-performing organizations ask one question in every initial candidate conversation: "What feedback have you gotten from your pastor?" This open-ended question immediately reveals the state of church connection and the candidate's posture toward accountability. Three outcomes are possible:

- **Pastor affirms calling and readiness:** Process continues. Church partnership is already foundational.
- **Pastor sees potential but recommends more time locally:** Candidate moves to structured nurture pipeline. Pastoral wisdom is honored, not bypassed.
- **Candidate has not spoken to pastor or lacks church connection:** Process is paused. Mobilizer coaches candidate toward building genuine church relationship before proceeding.

*"We're big on asking open-ended questions. 'What feedback have you gotten from your pastor?' That usually sets up whatever comes next. We're not manipulating or trying to move people along against their timeline—we're trying to help them reach a good decision."*

## 2. Partnership Documents and Agreements

East-West Ministries developed a comprehensive church partnership document shared with all sending churches that outlines the roles and responsibilities of the church, the agency, and the missionary. This document includes a formal partnership agreement and pastoral resources about the organization's theology and ministry approach. Their mobilization team identifies this as one of the most significant improvements in their partnership effectiveness.

Similar tools—what might be called "sending church onboarding"—communicate respect for the pastor's role, set clear shared expectations, and transform the church's relationship with the agency from transactional to genuinely collaborative.

## 3. Regular, Substantive Communication Throughout the Process

High-performing agencies communicate with sending church leadership throughout the candidate process—not just collecting references at the beginning. They send progress updates, solicit pastoral observations, involve church leaders in assessment conversations where appropriate, and treat the pastor's perspective as genuinely valuable rather than merely documentary.

Organizations that maintain this communication rhythm report that churches become significantly more engaged in supporting their missionary members—more intentional in prayer, more generous in financial support, and more equipped to provide meaningful pastoral care at a distance.

## 4. Church-Integrated Pre-Field Training

Rather than conducting pre-field training entirely in agency-run contexts separate from church community, leading organizations design training that includes church participation. Some provide curriculum for candidates to work through under pastoral supervision. Others invite sending church leaders to participate in training retreats. Launch Global embeds candidates in nine-month community cohorts that include the church context as a formative environment.

## 5. Non-Negotiable Church Requirement

AIM is explicit: requiring a sending church is non-negotiable. A candidate who is unwilling to build or maintain a sending church relationship has demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding of what missionary service is. Most organizations hold this conviction even when they express it with varying degrees of formality. The consistent finding: organizations that proceed without genuine church partnership produce missionaries who struggle significantly more on the field.

## Warning Signs Mobilizers Should Recognize

- Candidate is enthusiastic about missions but describes minimal or vague church involvement
- Candidate is hiding missionary interest from their pastor or church leadership
- Candidate interprets pastoral hesitation as the pastor being unspiritual rather than as potentially valid concern
- Church letter exists but no substantive relationship between church leadership and the process has been established
- Candidate has no clear community that will pray for them by name and hold them accountable

## The Cost of Proceeding Without Church Partnership

The research is consistent. Candidates sent without genuine church partnership experience harder support raising, lower field resilience, greater isolation during crises, and more difficult reintegration. Current missionaries surveyed consistently identified stronger church involvement as the single change that would most have improved their preparation. 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."

## Immediate Action Steps

- **Audit your discovery conversation:** Is 'What feedback have you gotten from your pastor?' asked in every initial call? What is your protocol when the answer reveals weak church connection?
- **Develop a church partnership document:** Create a clear, accessible resource outlining the roles of church, agency, and missionary. Share it proactively with every sending church, not just when requested.
- **Establish regular church communication:** Build structured touchpoints with sending church leadership throughout the process. Go beyond requesting information—provide updates and solicit their observations.
- **Examine your pre-field training:** Does it include churches as partners and participants, or is it conducted separately from church community? What would integration look like?

- **Require church connection genuinely:** If church partnership is "non-negotiable" in your policies, evaluate whether your practices reflect that conviction. What happens currently when candidates lack church partnership?

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**Research Base:** Structured interviews with mobilization leaders from 18+ organizations (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, Serge) and analysis of the 2025 Launch Survey (2,400+ respondents). Full paper available with extended analysis, theological foundations, organizational examples, and 10 discussion questions.