

## **What do we mean by 'Full-Time' Christian Work?**

There is a sense in which all Christians are called by God to work for him full-time. The concept of a 'part-time' Christian is something of a misnomer. However, for the purpose of this document, the term 'full-time' is used of those who leave their 'secular' employment in order to give themselves more fully to making Christ known. For some this is a call to work in their home country; for others it is a call to serve God overseas. Like all major decisions such a step requires a clear sense and confirmation of God's direction.

We must be careful to ascertain whether a call to full-time service is genuine, especially where the call is based on subjective feelings. In such cases our feelings could be motivated by a false sense of glamour or prestige that we might associate with the role of minister or missionary – such a role might appeal to our ego as well as our idealism. The apostle Paul paints a picture of the labours, struggles and demands of Christian service (I Cor 4:7-11; 11:23-29). Satan attacks Christians with the temptation to give up and despair and it is vital to know that, when the novelty has worn off, you are in the place where God has called you – not where you have chosen to be.

Our feelings are not always the best guide to determine whether we are called by God. Moses and Jeremiah in the Old Testament are examples of men who did not feel called – they were anything but enthusiastic volunteers – but ended up being thoroughly persuaded of God's call in spite of their resistance.

Unfortunately there is the temptation to view a call as a means of escape from the frustrations of working in secular employment and home situations but such factors are not a valid motive for entering full-time Christian work, as though this is an easier alternative. The reverse is often true as Paul warns us (II Cor 1:8-10) and as most Christians in full-time service testify.

Another temptation is to equate a call with a response to need. There are enormous needs at home and abroad but the knowledge of need and a desire to respond does not constitute a call. We must allow the Holy Spirit to say 'No' to us as well as 'Yes'.

We must also bear in mind the commitment that have to others. Jesus expects us to put Him first in our lives but He also requires us not to

neglect our responsibility to our dependents (e.g. elderly parents and/or children). In addition we have a moral responsibility to those who have financed an extended period of training on our behalf and might be advised not to prematurely leave a job for which we have been trained. Jesus roundly condemned the Pharisees and teachers of the law who used religious arguments to discourage the exercise of responsibilities to parents (Mk 7:10-12). This of course has wider application. Such factors do not prohibit service overseas but need to be weighed within the process of testing a call.

Our culture does not pre-dispose us to rely on the advice of others to identify with and confirm our personal sense of God's leading. There is however a strong Biblical pattern that links individual call with corporate sending (e.g. Acts 13:1-3; Rom 10:14-15).

## **Sending – a Biblical Pattern of Partnership (Acts 13:1-3)**

This passage provides three principles for embarking on 'full-time' service at home or abroad.

### **1. The Holy Spirit's Initiative**

The Holy Spirit identified and called Barnabas and Saul (later Paul) from amongst others in the church at Antioch and instructed the church to set them apart and send them. There are other examples in the New Testament of the God directing His servants into areas of service (Acts 16:6-10; 20:22-23). It was the Holy Spirit that took the initiative in each case.

### **2. Testing and Gifting**

Barnabas and Saul were not random choices – they had been prepared and equipped and their gifts and commitment had been tested. At the time of their calling they were serving God faithfully in a local church in relative obscurity before being sent out as missionaries.

In the same way, those who are sent out by a local church should have first served in a similar capacity in their home setting so that their gifts can be tested by the local church. It is to be expected that such gifts will flourish and blossom in new ways when they have moved into new ministries but it would be wrong to send anybody before their gifts have been tested.

### 3. Church Involvement

The command of the Holy Spirit to the church at Antioch was to set apart Barnabas and Paul and to send them. The command was to the church not to the individuals; they were not commanded to act independently of the church. The church took its responsibility very seriously by fasting and praying and by laying hands on Barnabas and Saul. The matter of prayer and fasting preceded the laying on of hands. This was the process by which the church verified the call and identified with the call of Barnabas and Saul.

We also find that Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch to share with the church "... *all that God had done through them.*" and remained at the church for some time before setting off again (Acts 14:24-28).

Throughout his letters Paul expresses a sense of dependence on the prayers and support of others and recognises that those churches that send out workers have an ongoing responsibility to them (Col 4:9, 12).

Those sent out by Widcombe will be those who we believe the Holy Spirit has spoken to, whose gifts we have tested and whose call we have confirmed by our own prayers and waiting on God. Missionary Societies play a very important role in facilitating overseas service. Their experience, practical expertise, local knowledge and pastoral support are invaluable. Those sent out by Widcombe will need to be linked with a Missionary Society with whom we will liaise closely to ensure that they are fully equipped for overseas service.

### Practical Implications

There are a number of practical steps that need to be taken before somebody is sent out from us at Widcombe. These are as follows:-

1. **Prayer** – this needs to be sustained and specific about where you believe God wants you to serve Him. Whilst God knows the end from the beginning, He reveals His purposes to us on a gradual basis. Be part of the corporate prayer life of the church by attending Church Night, Home Groups and the missionary Prayer Meeting. If this seems too demanding it is unlikely that you are called by God to be one who would hope to be supported by the prayers of people at home.

2. **Gather Information** – about the particular type of service or part of the world that you are especially concerned about. The Missionary Council can point you in the right direction about sources for relevant information. Attendance at Missions Conferences can also be useful opportunities to gather information and consult with serving missionaries. Initial idealism needs to be tested by exposure to the facts. Sometimes short-term service is possible over a summer holiday period or at other times. This is another area in which the Missionary Council can assist you.
3. **Talk to the church leaders** – this needs to be sooner rather than later and cannot be over-stressed. If you want the church to identify with what you believe to be God's call you need to involve the church at an early stage and resist the temptation to take important decisions of this nature without the objective advice of the church leaders. Even advice from family and friends is insufficient. Church leaders have a God-given responsibility for you and you need to respect that and lean on it. In this way you will benefit from the counsel, advice and prayers of the church. At some stage you will be asked to meet with the church leaders and the Missionary Council.
4. **Serve in the church** – whatever God has for you in the future He has placed you in Widcombe at the present and He expects you to serve Him wholeheartedly in the church and in your secular employment. In this way your gift will be assessed and tested. Training does not only take place in Bible College but 'on the job' in the local church situation.
5. **Trust God** – finding God's way can be very perplexing and requires a great deal of patience. God is sovereign and the whole matter is in His hands. When doors close it is easy to be dismayed but God knows what He is doing even if you don't! God often uses such means to test our endurance and perseverance – characteristics that we will need to employ when we are in an overseas situation. Learning to trust God under these circumstances is His way of preparing you for the future. There are many instances of God's servants being prepared over long periods of time (e.g. Moses spending 40 years in the desert

before God called him). Even Jesus had to wait until He was 30 years of age before His ministry began.

6. **Training** – it may be appropriate for you to consider some training at Bible College. This is not essential and there are good courses that can be undertaken by means of distance learning. The church leaders and Missionary Council will advise you on this.

However, at some stage money will become an issue. If you go to Bible College how will you pay the fees? We believe that God will supply our needs when we follow the path that He has for us but this fact does not absolve us of the need to weigh up the financial implications.

There is a clear Biblical principle that the full-time Christian worker is worthy of financial support from those who benefit from his ministry. However even Paul did not just 'launch out in faith' and expect others to provide and provided for his own means of support rather than being a burden to the churches.

There is therefore Biblical precedent for generating one's own support to the extent that this is possible. At a human level people are likely to be more favourably disposed towards somebody who has made some effort to generate a level of support rather than simply expect others to provide everything.

Widcombe has a policy of not providing full support for Bible College training believing that the period of training is a sifting time and an opportunity to rely on God in practical ways which is itself a confirmation of God's leading. The church does however give significant help in appropriate cases; friends and family normally assist; assistance may be available from Christian trusts and it may be possible to obtain assistance from local authorities (e.g. student loans. The church leaders and Missionary Council can point you in the right direction if you require help.

7. **Beyond training** – God leads us one step at a time. It may be that the specific area of service that God has for you may not be obvious until quite late in the day and may even prove to be rather different to that which you originally intended. We are called to live by faith; being certain that God will direct us. As a church we do not guarantee that we will send as a missionary anybody simply because they have been to Bible College; indeed some may return to secular employment and continue serving in

the church. A number of factors need to be considered including reports from the Bible College.

The process of sending missionaries is for the church leaders to bring a recommendation to the Church Members for approval and for financial support. The church operates a policy of underwriting 'full support'. This does not mean that the church pays everything. There is an expectation that a degree of support will be obtained by missionaries from other sources (friends, family and other organisations). Where we are fully persuaded of somebody's calling and approve them as a missionary we will make up the shortfall in their financial needs.

Support is more than simply financial. Through the Missionary Council we encourage the church to be informed about and prays regularly for the ongoing needs of our missionaries. In addition the church provides practical support and advice prior to missionaries going from us, whilst they are away from us and on their return.

## **In Conclusion**

The transition from secure employment, family, familiar friends and church to the new world of Bible College and full-time Christian service can be a testing time of insecurity, adjustment and uncertainty. But the Lord is sufficient and He promises that He will never abandon those who put their trust in Him. It is part of our high privilege and calling as a church to send out and support those whom the Lord is calling out into His harvest field.