



UPSTREAM



INFLUENCING YOUR SENDING CHURCH SENDING ELEMENT #14

The fourteenth element is “Inviting Sent Ones’ Influence.” It is defined in the following way:

A sending church invites sent ones’ influence when it eagerly desires the unique encouragement that comes from sent ones, as modeled in the New Testament. Whether the sent ones are on field or furlough, the church initiates opportunities for them to influence through presence, reporting, and exhortation.

Ideally the sending church would initiate and welcome influence from its sent ones (for guidance on how churches can do this, see our resource “Inviting Sent Ones’ Influence”). However, regardless of whether the church does so or not, sent ones should still seek to influence their sending church. This is the example we see in Acts 14 when Paul and Barnabas finished their first missionary journey:

²⁶ From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. ²⁷ On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. ²⁸ And they stayed there a long time with the disciples. Acts 14:26-28

Three actions stand out:

1. They returned to their sending church and gathered it together. They took the initiative and sought the reconnection.
2. They gave a report about all that God did on their journey. They told stories of their gospel encounters and gave glory to God for the work.
3. They stayed with the church for a long time. They deeply reentered relationships and the life of the church.

While this is not prescriptive, it does seem to be a good description of the posture of sent ones who want to influence their sending church. How can you take on this posture? What does it practically look like? Here are some ideas we have observed over the years.

Influencing the Church from the Field

The key word we want to emphasize here is proactive. Don't assume the church will take the initiative (even though they should). Reach out to them about ways you'd like to keep them informed. See which of those ways work best for them, or if they have other ideas. Some suggestions include:

- Set up some video conference calls to give updates. These calls could be with pastors, staff, small groups, children's classes, etc. In some instances, you may even be able to be streamed into a church-wide gathering.
- Send out regular written updates via email or social media. Make sure you keep them somewhat short. Include compelling stories and, if possible, pictures that coincide. Also give specific prayer requests.
- Start a text thread or text chain. Then keep the recipients updated with urgent updates and needs. This can allow church members to be actively, consistently involved in the work.
- Create videos for the church to use. It's great if you can make them at high quality, but in most cases short videos made from a smartphone or camera work well (and can even appear more authentic).
- Make a virtual prayer walk. This could be a guided video or audio recording that leads people to experience and pray for your work. Make it visual, auditory, and/or tactile so it engages with the senses.
- Send out prayer cards or magnets. Make sure they are visually appealing. If possible, include how they can sign up for your updates, learn more about your ministry, and pray specifically for you.
- Write handwritten letters to the church. Just think, this ancient Christian practice is what led to most of the New Testament! Although you won't be penning Scripture, your written words could still powerfully influence the church.
- Rather than waiting for the church to send you a care package, send a care package to the church. Include special items from your culture, explanations of them, and how they should compel people to pray.
- Organize a virtual mission trip for your church (see our resource, "Taking a Virtual Short Term Trip"). This could allow people to engage with your culture who otherwise might never visit you in person.

Influencing the Church While on Furlough

It's also important to be proactive while on furlough. Consider having a conversation with a church leader as early as six months prior to the furlough. This would allow both parties to brainstorm ideas and discuss dates of availability. Plans could then be solidified within a month of the furlough's start. Some possibilities are:

- Prepare three summaries of your life and work: one that's thirty seconds, one that's five minutes, and one that's thirty minutes. Though it's sad but true, these are the most common lengths of conversations you will have with people.

- Take part in the Sunday service. Graciously take as much time as they will give you. Maximize it by preparing what you say, sharing your most compelling stories, and clarifying how people can learn more.
- Host a reception immediately following the Sunday service. Make it easy for people to stop by and learn more about you and your work. Try to make the decor and snacks reflect your culture.
- Make a personal visit to all the church's small groups. Let the group leaders know when you're coming and that you'd like to share a bit. Then not only share, but actively participate in the group meeting.
- Put together a well made video testimony that can be shown, and then followed by corporate prayer. If there are no security concerns, this can then also be used on the church's social media channels.
- Meet with the church's pastors and/or staff. Share honestly with them about the joys and challenges of your life and ministry. If possible, serve them a meal from a restaurant of your culture.
- Take any opportunity you can to teach, whether in missions classes or other settings. This allows the church to experience firsthand your passion and gifting, which will in itself communicate about your work.
- Be especially intentional to spend time with the church's missions leaders. Attend their meetings, but also seek out special meetings wherein you can report at length. This may even serve as a debriefing opportunity.
- Decide prior to the furlough that you will be more interested in others than you are in yourself. Rather than waiting for people to engage with you, engage with them. Love and listen to them, and hopefully they will reciprocate.
- Take the initiative to invite people over for meals. This is probably the best way to develop relationships and to share who you are. This is very likely where Paul and Barnabas spent much of their time upon return to their sending church.

The intention here isn't that you try to do all these things, but that you find a few ideas that work for you. Just like Paul and Barnabas impacted the church at Antioch, God wants to use your gifts, calling, and experiences to build up his church. In this way you can have a fruitful ministry not only overseas, but also back home.