

## MISSION ENCOURAGERS?

By Martin Lee

Which person has had the greatest influence on your life? For me that person was an obscure Anglican minister called Roy Clarke. Roy was only known locally. He wasn't the world's greatest preacher, teacher, theologian, administrator or evangelist. Yet I could never come away from meeting him without feeling enthused and empowered. More than anyone else I have ever met, he was a great encourager especially of my role in mission. He lived out a life that made me want to copy him - reaching out with love to others and standing up for justice.

Given Roy's example, it is not surprising that my favourite biblical character is Barnabas, the son of encouragement. There is a lot I have learned from Barnabas' example about what it means to be an encourager. I hope that the following thoughts might help us as we seek to be encouragers of mission within our own situation, locality or church.

Firstly, HE LIVED WHOLEHEARTEDLY. He gave all that he had (Acts 4v36). Sadly one of the problems of the church in the UK seems to be its half-heartedness, both personally and corporately. Mission is often on the edge of church life and survival seems the only driving force. Reaching out to those around us, standing up for justice, changing our lifestyle, showing unconditional love for all including the unlovely, even actually talking to our neighbour – no longer seem essential to living out our faith. Which begs the question; do we really have a passion and heart for mission ourselves and are we wholehearted in our love for others? We know that mission is not only for those called overseas or to full-time ministry, and yet.... Roy taught me that the Christian life is really all about living out a missional lifestyle, not an appendix to normal life. He didn't do that with clever stories or great preaching, but just by living such a life in front of me.

So – as we seek to encourage others in being involved in mission, does our own life show forth that passion and heart for mission?

Secondly, HE TOOK RISKS WITH PEOPLE. Barnabas was the one person who was prepared to take a risk with Paul, seeking him out when others were afraid (Acts 12). Roy took a similar risk with me. He had had a big split in his church with a whole group leaving to set up their own church, yet despite my involvement with a sister church he was still prepared to trust this arrogant opinionated young man who applied to join a mission agency, which he chaired. As Christians often we aren't very good at risk and sadly it seems my generation (I'm in my 50s now) is particularly poor at trusting young people, seeing their leadership potential and understanding their vision. We make a whole host of excuses. They're too inexperienced, they're not really interested, and they'll make a mess of it. Yet the same could have been said of some of the most influential people in mission history - just think of Hudson Taylor!

So – do our churches and mission structures empower young visionaries, or are we afraid of the risks involved? Does our mission encouragement seek to empower younger people or will we not let them get involved?

Thirdly, HE ALLOWED OTHERS TO TAKE THE LEAD when he saw their potential. Initially it is Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13 v2), then Barnabas and Paul and soon after Paul and Barnabas. Eventually it became just Paul, and Barnabas drops out of the reckoning. The rest of Acts is about Paul's ministry, not Barnabas. I wonder where he was and what he was doing. He hardly gets a mention after this. Within two years, Roy had allowed me at the age of 28 to take the lead in CORD. He saw potential (well maybe discernment wasn't his gift!!) and was happy to step aside. In our generation we have seen a great shift in the demographics of the church. No longer is the West the centre of the Christian faith, rather it has moved to the Global South - Africa, South America and Asia. Yet the western church hardly seems to have noticed it. Our church and mission structures struggle to cope with this new dynamic. How can the western church and mission agencies link in creative ways with new emerging mission movements from the Global South - empowering, encouraging, in true partnership, even stepping aside to let them take the lead. How can we use the wealth and resources we have in the West in a way that is liberating, not controlling? All too often we still feel we have all the answers and rarely want to learn from the Global South. Yet here is where much growth is, where God's Spirit is moving.

So - how can we learn from what God is doing elsewhere? Are we still in the old mindset of the West to the rest? Have we caught up with the UK being a mission field itself? And are we willing to encourage others whom God is using?

Lastly, HE NEVER GAVE UP ON PEOPLE. The story of his support for Mark in Acts 15 vv 36 – 41 to me is one of the most amazing lessons in the Bible. It led to his disagreement with Paul and their separation. Yet it seems also to have led to the restoration of Mark so that eventually even Paul wanted him back by his side. (2 Timothy 4 v 11 “Get Mark for he is useful to me in the ministry” and Colossians 4 v 10 “Mark sends greetings”) So often it is easy to give up on people and situations. Despite all my failings and stumbles, Roy never gave up on me, always alongside when I needed to talk, yet never taking over when it would have been easier than letting me mess up. The same challenge can face us as we seek to encourage others.

So - are we letting God refresh us so that like Barnabas we experience that “never give up” heart of God? Having identified the next generation with potential, are we supporting, encouraging, and getting alongside?

It isn't easy sometimes being involved on the mission support team in a church, especially when people seem just to be interested in survival. As we seek to see our churches more involved in mission both locally and globally, are we true encouragers like Barnabas and Roy?

My prayer for each of us is that we will be wholehearted in sharing the gospel and caring for others, be risk takers in encouraging younger leaders, be willing to learn from others especially those outside our culture and be those that never give up. And through it all, truly be people who see mission at the heart of the church and church at the heart of mission.

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Before joining Global Connections, he was on the staff of CORD (Christian Outreach – Relief and Development) for 25 years. During that time CORD grew from a small one country project to become a major UK based Christian relief and development agencies with projects and staff in 13 countries.

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